$2.25 May 9, 1997

COMMONWEAL

Spring Books

SARA MAITLAND
on Muriel Spark

VALERIE SAYERS
on Kate Atkinson

LAWRENCE DOUGLAS
on Daniel Goldhagen's
'Hitler's Willing Executioners'

SUZANNE KEEN
on James T. Fisher's
'Dr. Dooley'

CLARE COLLINS
on David Loxterkamp

A Zairian Journey by Rand Richards Cooper

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To the Editors

And the same to you

Note: This letter accompanied a one-year subscription renewal. Sandra Smith manages Commonweal*'s circulation and signs our renewal/expiration reminders.*

Dear Sandra and friends,

We do indeed live in interesting times. Like a space voyage, my cancer has now been given a number, making it likely that the two expirations will be close. In a week they will do another CAT scan and read the batwings and lizard tails. I believe they should add the eye of the newt.

I have read *Commonweal* for more than fifty years—one thing I will miss. But my spirits are good, my coffin (juniper) is complete, and my humor remains. True, chemotherapy for seven-and-a-half hours on Good Friday was not humorous but a deeply spiritual experience.

With deep gratitude, I wish you the best. (REV.) EMMET HARRINGTON

Portland, Oreg.

Not for the garbage can

Your woes touched me to the point of writing out a check. This is despite my being highly offended by your unfunny "New Ostrich Review" ad some time back. Actually, some good came of it: I subscribed to the publication in question and sent them an even bigger check.

I guess I continue to read your publication out of habit. I'm occasionally amused and enlightened but more often incensed by your positions. But, even though I get mad at the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, and the *New Republic*, there's nothing I can do about it there, whereas I feel reasonably confident that my letters are not immediately tossed into the garbage can on Dutch Street (wherever that is). I'm also hoping that some day you will return to being a Catholic publication.

I'd be curious to know how many of your feminist, liberal subscribers heed your call in a tangible way. Damn few, I suspect. Anyhow, I'm relenting on my "not another dime" pledge of some time ago. So good luck. PHILIP ERARD

New York, N.Y.

Some are more unequal

Brian Lennon's "A Nation of Victims" [March 14] is an insightful view of the situation in the north of Ireland; his presentation of the victim status of the Protestant community in Ulster is an important message heard too seldom in this country. But, though his "double minority" analysis is helpful, I find that it goes too far toward leveling the status of the two minorities.

The Protestant community has indeed been the victim of many horrible atrocities, but the events of last summer's unrest show that it still holds the dominant hand in the life of the province. During the stand-off at Portadown it was able to cripple the province economically, virtually closing the airport, isolating towns and villages by barricades with little or no interference from the security forces, which reacted far more drastically when members of the Catholic community rioted after Unionist marchers were allowed to enter Catholic areas. Many Protestants in Ulster, knowing that the security forces are overwhelmingly Protestant, felt compromised by their evident bias.

The "field" mentioned by Father Lennon's high school friend is only a metaphor for a more general sense of security, of having some sense of control over the economic, social, and political life of the land under one's foot. In that light the sense of displacement felt by the Catholic community, expressed by the young man in the phrase "they robbed our land," is very understandable.

Surely all of us who care about the future of the province must continue to pray and work for peace and for the creation of the new "myths" of which Father Lennon writes. But, though we may begin by recognizing the double-minority status that exists, we must also acknowledge a fundamental inequality between the two minorities.

Though I was born and educated in this country, virtually the whole of my family lives in Ulster, and I spend several months at home there every year. I am currently a novice in the California province of the Society of Jesus. SEAN D. MICHAELSON, N.S.J.

Culver City, Calif.

Two-sided 'Troubles'

Brian Lennon's article is on the mark in finding victims on both sides in the struggles in Northern Ireland. But I am appalled by his remark that Unionists might be justified when they ask, "Why do people make such a fuss about what may have been an 'overreaction' by the British army on one occasion?"—that is, the events of Bloody Sunday, 1972.

Bloody Sunday and its cover-up constitute only a small part of a British army program of killings, prison internment for years without charges, late-night break-ins, destruction of homes, job discrimination, lack of police protection in Catholic areas, armed British troops among the baby carriages, and death-dealing Unionist paramilitary attacks—which are never described as terrorism in the British-

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Phone System

Commonweal has a one-year-old Toshiba DK16 phone system that the magazine will not need in its new offices. The system consists of a main switch box (8-line capacity), connectors, two 20-button phones, and nine 10-button phones—all fully programmable. The new equipment was installed at a price of $4,010 in February 1996. All reasonable offers considered. Please contact: Business Department, *Commonweal*, 15 Dutch Street, Rm. 502, New York, NY 10038, (212) 732-0800.

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COMMONWEAL

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controlled media.

ennon does recognize that "the British failed once again to respond to an IRA offer of a ceasefire." Until it is clear that British and Unionist negotiators truly care about justice and human rights for all, there will be frustrated, uncontrollable "wild cards" on both sides who cannot resist resorting to violence.

RUTH B. MOYNIHAN
Storrs, Conn.

The author replies:

I certainly did not want to give the impression that the Unionist view of Bloody Sunday is justified. It is not. Ruth Moynihan is quite correct in pointing out that this atrocity is simply one of many carried out by the British government in Northern Ireland. Further, one should expect higher standards from a government than from a paramilitary group. Nevertheless, many in the United States still focus only on abuses by the British government and seem to ignore those for which the Irish Republican Army is responsible, although this tendency thankfully has changed somewhat in recent years. It is worth noting that more than half of Catholic victims in Northern Ireland have been killed by Nationalist paramilitaries.

Sean Michaelson argues that I go too far in leveling the status of the two minorities. But does this matter, if the members of each group see themselves, with some legitimacy, as victims? The only way in which we in Ireland can move out of reciprocal victimhood is by doing so together. On this journey we need to distinguish between a human-rights agenda and a nationalist agenda.

Nationalism—the theory that the boundaries of the nation and the state should be congruent—is sometimes presented as a way of achieving human rights. It won't work in our context. That is why we need a new structure to replace the traditional nation state, one in which both Nationalists and Unionists will be as concerned about the human rights of the other as they are about their own, and in which these rights will be protected by the two governments.

BRIAN LENNON, S.J.

Bare bodkins at 10 paces

Will poor Richard Alleva challenge *Commonweal*'s staff to a duel for allowing his review of *Hamlet* (March 28) to be corrupted with a reference to the Dane's "marital" (should be "martial") tirade?

Confirming my suspicion, I opened my Penguin edition of the play and found the very page bookmarked to the tirade, which is certainly martial, with its

> Rightly to be great/Is not to stir without great argument/But greatly to find quarrel in a straw/When honor's at the stake.

That passage was marked because it too had a misprint: "It not" for "Is not."

Does Shakespeare haunt the printshops that distort his lines? Will Alleva find quarrel in a last straw?

LEON LUKASZEWSKI
Walnut Creek, Calif.

The twain once did meet

I am grateful to Jerry Ryan for his striking essay [April 11] on the Eastern and Western interpretations of the dead Christ's descent into hell, but surely the further back in Christian history one goes, the closer one comes to a time in which these now divergent emphases were still convergent. The Eastern emphasis on the defeat of Death is audible, for example, in the ancient Western hymn, *Victimae paschali*:

> Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando.
> Dux vitae mortuus regnat vivus.
> Translating, all too prosaically:
> Death and Life fought a wondrous duel.
> Life's dead champion living reigns.

The same agonistic emphasis lives on, if barely, in the Western tradition of the harrowing of hell—that is, not its plowing but its pillage—by a Christ who falls not just into it but upon it as an aggressor upon territory he will take. Christ descends, we might well say, as a wolf on Death's fold, though he is the Lamb:

> Agnus redemit oves.
> Christus innocens Patri reconciliavit peccatores.
> The Lamb has saved the sheep.
> Innocent Christ has reconciled sinners to the Father.

The usual statement of the difference between the Eastern and Western forms of Christianity is that the Eastern is mystical and liturgical, the Western theological and legal. On that spectrum, however, this poem occupies a middle position. The *Victimae paschali* poet, as I read him, sought to recapitulate a myth rather than either summarize a theology or convey a mystical experience. The poem may imply both a theology and a mysticism. It directly expresses neither. No poet writing in English has yet put this masterpiece into adequately compelling verse. Someone should try.

JACK MILES
Pasadena, Calif.

The writer is the author of God: A Biography *(Knopf).*

War on the needy?

I have read enough of Gertrude Himmelfarb to know that she is capable of expressing quite clearly what she intends to say. I was surprised, therefore, to find in your editorial rejection of a balanced-budget amendment ["Just Say No," February 28] a quotation of hers followed by this: "The rage for balanced budgets, *in other words*, is really a war on the idea of government's responsibililty for the common good, and especially for the needy—a war being waged by fiscal strangulation"

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Testing China...and us

The Chinese government is invading Hong Kong. In preparation for its July 1 takeover, Beijing has stationed there a forty-man contingent of the Red Army. True, the troops are unarmed and their numbers are hardly a threat; according to plan, the Chinese commander was correctly greeted by his British counterpart. But this, added to the Chinese government's repeal of certain civil liberties recognized under Hong Kong's 1992 Basic Law and Beijing's summary and undemocratic formation of a new legislature, sounds another somber note in what is coming to seem a triumphalist march to reclaim the colony.

The Chinese actions are perfectly legal under the terms of its treaty with Britain. And recognizing China's territorial integrity, at least in this case, may be an important step in normalizing its place in a postcolonial world. But the peremptory character of these actions demonstrates, if demonstration were necessary, that Beijing has an attitude problem. It wants its territory returned, it wants to reassert political and cultural control, yet it wants the wealth, the energy, and the business acumen of Hong Kong. Very clearly the people of Hong Kong will bear the brunt of this bullying and arrogant reassertion of political control while being expected to maintain the territory's level of economic performance.

For reasons of solidarity, it is important for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to be present at the July 1 turning-over ceremonies—and important for her to be seen to be in attendance at the behest of democratic activists in Hong Kong, who appealed directly to her to attend. A diplomatic show is hardly out of order, but the more important question is whether such gestures will be anywhere near enough to signal U.S. interest in the future welfare of Hong Kong's citizens.

Leverage in dealing with the Chinese is limited, not least because there is little international willingness to bring concerted pressure on China to improve its sorry record on human and political rights. The Clinton administration has had its own leverage problems, now further complicated by both the shadow of a fund-raising scandal that may involve the Chinese government and by Vice-President Al Gore's sorry performance during his recent visit to Beijing.

Beijing points to China's five thousand years of civilization as proof that it has nothing to learn about human rights from the West or from its own domestic critics. But this is disingenuous. It is true that abuses practiced and tolerated by Western nations in their colonial heyday—not least in China itself—hardly offer an unblemished example. But the fact is that human rights, however they may be constitutionally construed and codified, have their basis in the fundamental dignity of each individual person. That understanding of the sanctity of human life, which is largely a modern and Western achievement but can also find support within Chinese culture (especially in Buddhism), is slowly but surely seeping into every nook and cranny of the world. China remains an increasingly anachronistic exception to this development.

Like all "great" civilizations, the Chinese one has its dark ages—at some pe-

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riods as brutal as anything perpetrated by the West. China too is an imperial power; it too has colonized other countries and brutalized their people: Tibet is only the most glaring and recent example. No nation or civilization is exempt from such failings. Nonetheless, distinctions can and should still be made. Constitutional limits placed on the power of government and constitutional protections of individual liberty are not imperialism by other means, but the best way to foster both human flourishing and a well-ordered society.

The people of Hong Kong know this and have much to teach the rest of China about how democracy works. It is up to our government to support them through diplomatic means, and when necessary through economic and political pressures. If the Clinton administration hesitates to act, then the rest of us must take up the slack through the power of protest and persuasion, and the power of the purse.

Production Editor: *Commonweal* seeks a new production editor to begin work in mid-June. The position requires knowledge of word processing and page composition using Microsoft Word, QuarkXPress, Adobe Illustrator, and Adobe Photoshop for Macintosh. Familiarity with PCs, translating and archiving software, and networking is necessary. The production editor works closely with the editors, business manager, and graphics designer on a variety of production and promotion tasks. Among them: preparing copy, selecting illustrations, and creating promotional material. He or she should be organized, flexible, and able to handle details under deadline. Experience with printers helpful. Four-day work week. Benefits. Please send a cover letter, résumé, and samples of work projects to the Editor, *Commonweal*, 15 Dutch St., New York, N.Y. 10038.

OF SEVERAL MINDS

SIDNEY CALLAHAN

WE, THE PEOPLE—OF GOD

The church needs a constitution

What do you think, an interviewer asked the noted theologian Charles Davis, "is the greatest challenge facing the church at the present time?" Davis was a *peritus* at Vatican II but, on becoming disillusioned over the church's lack of commitment to reform, left the priesthood in 1966 for a teaching career.

"My answer will surprise many," Davis replied, "but I regard the most important task at present a juridical one, namely the establishment of a democratic constitution for the church."

A constitutional reform was viewed by Davis as our communion's most pressing need because, "since the fifteenth century, the church as a community has been struggling to embody the Christian values in a juridical constitution that is based on an absolute monarchy."

Well said. When recent observers of the Vatican write about its internal workings, they stress that the pope is not just the leader of a worldwide faith institution but also the reigning head of a papal court. A court!? Still?

Jesus explicitly instructed his followers not to exercise authority as the pagans do. Authority is instituted among Christians for the sake of loving service and ordered unity. The Christian faithful should follow the spirit of truth in humble and familial respect for one another's dignity of conscience.

For the first thousand years, Catholics usually chose their leaders and lived by the dictum voiced by Pope Leo the Great (d. 461), "Let him who will stand before all be elected by all." Another traditional Catholic maxim in these matters from the monastic tradition is expressed as "What touches all is to be discussed and approved by all." Modern democracy and inclusive democratic institutions can find their roots in the Christian doctrine of the moral equality of each human being created in the image of God. Now those inside the church can retrieve and renew the Catholic human-rights tradition.

Recent popes have praised secular democracies and vigorously defended human rights. Yet most of the Christian faithful have little voice in the decisions that govern their church. Religious orders are one good example of participatory decision making within their communities, and national conferences of bishops discuss issues and vote to decide things; but both may be overruled by Rome. In Rome itself the college of cardinals votes to elect the next pope. Yet to come is any move to follow recommendations made after Vatican II that the pope be elected by representatives from all of the world's national churches along with the College of Cardinals.

Neither has the hope of many of the framers of the reformed 1983 Code of Canon of Law been fulfilled that administrative tribunals be set up in every diocese.

Church historians have noted that it takes a century or two of transition and turmoil before a council's reforms become fully assimilated into the church's life. Oh please, say it's not so. At this point the church is preaching "a civilization of love" and asserting with Pope Paul VI that "justice is love's absolute minimum," but we are not rushing to set up democratic procedures *within* the church.

In the new code of canon law the laity are enjoined to take up their right and duty "to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the church." But where is there any time or place for consulta-

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tion or participatory decision making on matters that affect us all? You can write a letter to your bishop or to Rome, or sign a petition, but that's about it. Occasionally there is a diocesan synod or hearings are set up by a group of bishops, but nothing need necessarily happen afterward. Our leaders have no accountability to the people and secrecy reigns at most levels of church governance.

Lack of dialogue or of open, inclusive due processes of law, retards our abilities to resolve the intracommunity conflicts we face. Our renewed ecclesial theology remains at odds with the remnants (and resisting forces) of monarchical governance. Have Vatican II reforms been partially aborted? All too obviously, factions, politics, and patronage play a part in the naming of bishops.

New bishops or new cardinals, along with new pastors, appear on the scene, duly introduced as "our" leaders. Until recent centuries, the pope and the Roman curia seldom claimed the absolute right to name all local bishops throughout the world. This practice makes it appear as though the bishop were sent as an agent or representative (or franchised product) *from* the Roman pontiff rather than being the leader *of* and *for* the local church. Ever greater centralization of power and efforts at control are the marks of outmoded authoritarian principles.

Why can't we move on to new institutional structures that reflect our renewed theology and our experiences of what works best in just, democratic communities? Surely, through listening to the Holy Spirit, the church has evolved theologically. Doctrine develops, and sometimes teachings are reversed and/or tactfully discarded. Today, there exist no defenders of slavery, inquisitional torture, crusades, women's inferiority, the perfidy of the Jews, the damnation of unbaptized babies and those outside the church. Our councils, bishops, and popes proclaim an inclusive gospel of equality, peace, liberty of conscience, democracy, and human rights. They convincingly ground this gospel on deeper, fuller understandings of Scripture. But if Christians are committed to bringing God's kingdom here on earth, we have to get busy reforming our own household of faith. Why not complete the work of Vatican II before the next millennium?

A good account of past struggles, developments, and recommendations for new democratic church reforms can be found in Leonard Swidler's *Toward a Catholic Constitution* (Crossroad, 1996). There you learn of the early church's democratic practices and see how church authority became deformed during the medieval papacies, those supremacists pushing their own papal divine right over the divine right of kings. Subsequent reform movements are detailed which culminated in Vatican II. And Swidler goes on to describe the ever-reforming pilgrimage of the church in the present. A multitude of reform groups spring up in the church because more and more persons are suffering, and becoming concerned about abuses of authority.

Happily, democratic structures encourage successful communities because persons who have a stake and a say in a group work harder to remain faithful. Group morale, esprit, and energy are liberated by increased participatory decision making. When democratic authority is exercised appropriately for the common good, the faithful cooperate.

Working for structural reforms and the restitution of collegial authority in the church may not seem to be a heart-gripping cause. But if we do not live the gospel we preach to the world, the salt will have lost its savor. □

Edward McGlynn Gaffney

LIBERTY INTERESTS

They do not include suicide

Until Oregon amended its constitution in 1994, all fifty states prohibited physician-assisted suicide, either expressly or implicitly but unambiguously in the criminal sanctions for homicide. Two of the most publicized cases before the Supreme Court this year—*Washington* v. *Glucksberg* and *Vacco* v. *Quill*—could require all the states to abandon these laws. *Glucksberg* asks whether the due-process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment protects the liberty of patients to end their own lives by seeking the assistance of a doctor, and whether doctors are free to provide this "service" to their patients. *Quill* questions whether a state violates the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment if it draws a line between letting a patient die and actively causing a patient's death.

Liberty and equality are noble values in our constitutional order, but neither liberty nor equality should diminish our respect for human life. The very text of the Fourteenth Amendment relied upon by those promoting physician-assisted suicide poses a serious difficulty: "No state can deprive any person of *life*, liberty, or property without due process or law...nor shall [it] deprive any person of equal protection of the laws" (emphasis added). The framers of this provision clearly thought of life, liberty, and equality as harmonious goals, not as mutual contradictions. It is a stretch to think of terminating life as a constitutional means of promoting liberty or equality.

The principal argument in *Glucksberg* is that the human person should be free to decide not only when but how to die. This argument equates liberty with personal autonomy, exalting the freely choosing self. It acknowledges the possibility of abuse if physician-assisted suicide were to be normalized, but the only boundaries with which it concerns itself are those that protect the voluntary character of suicide. Its assumption that physician-assisted suicide can be confined to a mentally competent person in the final stages of a terminal illness who voluntarily wishes to end his or her life is naïve. Each of the key terms—terminal illness, competence, and voluntariness—is an ambivalent, empty ves-

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sel waiting to be filled with the ideology of those who wish to embark on a grand social experiment on the issues of life and death.

But the fundamental flaw is the argument's misconception of constitutional liberty. It is true that some liberties should not depend on the outcome of elections. Earlier this century the Court began to give special protection to religious freedom, freedom of speech, and of the press, calling them "fundamental liberties" because it would be hard to conceive of our society without them. When the political branches enact laws that abridge these basic civil liberties, we should rejoice that a vigilant Court would nullify these laws as violations of the Constitution. But since the customs and traditions of our people have never thought of taking one's own life—let alone of assisting another to do so—as a fundamental liberty, the judiciary should defer to the political process on this issue. Several justices reminded counsel at oral argument that the states are entitled to considerable judicial deference in choosing among policy alternatives ("Good Questions," *Commonweal*, January 31, 1997).

The argument in *Glucksberg* assumes rather than demonstrates a correlation between physician-assisted suicide and human freedom. The empirical evidence of this century in two dramatically different instances—Germany in the Nazi period and the Netherlands in the past decade—suggests that the outcome of doctors helping people to die is utter disregard for human freedom and human dignity. In the Nazi eugenics project, Hitler's doctors, not autonomous choosing patients, decided who was "worthy of life." In modern Holland, hundreds of doctors have admitted that they, not their patients, have decided the "right" moment for the patient to die.

Add to these historical episodes the phenomenon of "managed care" currently sweeping through medical practice in our country. Under these circumstances the motive for recommending the "quick way out" may not be compassion—a virtue that means identifying and even suffering with a patient—but simply raw economic self-interest.

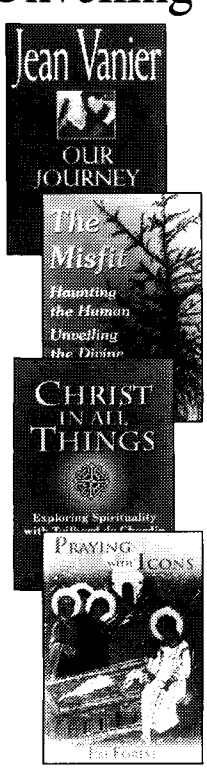
In *Vacco* v. *Quill*, the argument is that it is irrational for New York to allow doctors to provide a variety of pain-killers but to prohibit the prescription of a lethal dose to a dying patient. But as with the liberty argument in *Glucksberg*, the argument in *Quill* misconceives the meaning of constitutional equality. The Constitution mandates that judges strike down laws that assault the equal dignity of persons before the law, but it does not give judges a roving warrant to invalidate all legislation which they find offensive or unwise. The most notorious examples of laws held to violate the equal-protection clause were the Jim Crow laws. When the Court began to repudiate these laws in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954), it was acting consistently with the purpose and meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment. And when, more recently, it began to invalidate laws that, in Justice William Brennan's phrase, placed women "more in a cage than on a pedestal," it was once again promoting the equal dignity of all persons before the law, irrespective of gender. But the laws prohibiting physician-assisted suicide are not based on hostility to anyone because of race or gender. On the contrary, these laws promote the equal value of the lives of all persons.

If it is by no means clear in *Glucksberg* that physician-assisted suicide would insure human freedom, it is even more dubious in *Quill* that physician-assisted suicide would promote equal justice. The probability is high that it would impose far more serious burdens on the poor, minorities, and the disabled. As Judge John T. Noonan, Jr., noted in his opinion in the Ninth Circuit, these groups "would be especially open to manipulation." For example, wrote Noonan, "when the nondisabled say they want to die, they are labeled as suicidal; if they are disabled, it is treated as 'natural' or 'reasonable'....An insidious bias against the handicapped—again coupled with a cost-saving mentality—makes them especially in need of statutory protection."

On the day the Court heard argument in these cases, hundreds of disabled protesters in wheelchairs reinforced Noonan's point, chanting outside the Court, "We're not dead yet." Whether the Court heard this chant in so many words, it should be careful about the enormous implications for our culture that flow from thinking of physician-assisted suicide as a constitutional right grounded in either liberty or equality. □

Edward McGlynn Gaffney *is dean of the Valparaiso University School of Law in Valparaiso, Indiana.*

Unveiling the Divine



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A ZAIRIAN JOURNEY

Life under Mobutu, thief of all thieves

Rand Richards Cooper

Watching the tumultuous events in Central Africa in recent years, I've found it hard to square the ongoing agony with my memory of Rwanda, which I visited in 1982, while backpacking my way across the continent following a postcollege year in Kenya. Political atmosphere in nondemocracies ranges from hushed and fearful to open and vibrant, and Rwanda registered well above middle. A woman army officer I met at a party in Kigali in 1982 insisted her country had put the Tutsi-Hutu animosity behind it, and I believed her. Kigali itself was small, clean, and well-run. I didn't see trouble anywhere.

In Zaire, on the other hand, trouble was everywhere. Zaire *was* trouble. At the border at Goma, the customs officer dismissed my visa out of hand, just for the fun of doing so. "Il n'y a rien à dire!" he shouted. "C'est fini! Terminé!" A helpful Rwandan tipped me off to a second border crossing, with an official said to be more amenable to persuasion. In his dingy shack I emptied my backpack, and a little later, minus my tape recorder, proceeded into Goma, where that evening I was robbed at gunpoint by a trio of soldiers.

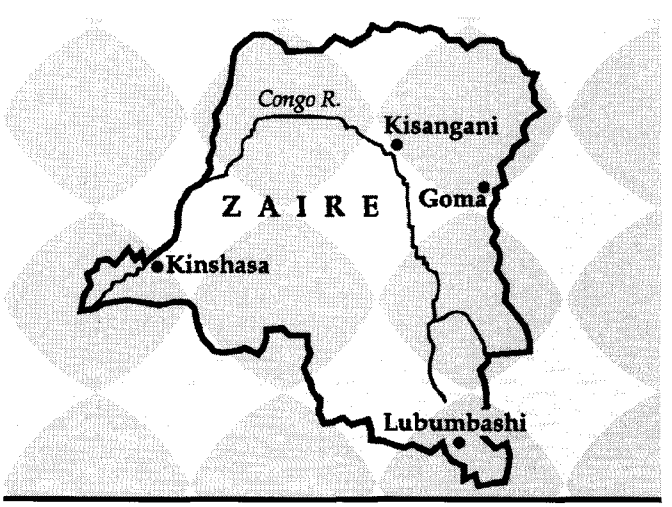
Bienvenue à Zaire!

Arriving in a country to be robbed by its security forces provides a helpful wake-up call for a traveler. If the little rules are being broken, so too are some of the bigger ones. In Zaire, it turned out, all the rules were being broken.

Nothing worked there. That was the most important thing to know about the place. Things fell apart: in Zaire, the irony of Yeats's famous line shrank to a narrow and mordant postcolonial truth. Telephones didn't work. Electricity didn't work. Maybe the line on your map corresponded to an actual road, or maybe not. Roads had dissolved back into the bush—the country had 10 percent of the paved highway it had had at independence from Belgium two decades earlier. Parks and schools lay in shabby neglect. Machines stood abandoned where they had broken down. In the capital, Kinshasa, I passed a vast yard of public buses, left to rust because there were no spare parts. This general ruin had given birth to caustic monikers with which people vented their frustration. The national air line, Air Zaire, was known as *Air Peut-être*; the government bureau in charge of road maintenance, the *Office des Trous*—the Bureau of Holes.

It's not easy for most Americans to comprehend, but there exists a blurry region where infrastructure—both physical and political—and morality overlap, and collapse in one system undermines the other. In Zaire, policemen and soldiers weren't being paid, so they robbed people, as they had robbed me, or free-lanced as hired thugs. A man in Kinshasa told me that for 1000Z (about $60 at the time) you could get your enemy publicly beaten, or his girlfriend raped, or his car burned. There was nothing in Zaire you couldn't get by paying for it, and precious little you *could* get *without* paying for it. I caught a ride from Goma through the Ituri forests to Kisangani with an Afro-Belgian trucker named Dédé who was hauling a load of goods from Kenya. He had three guys and a dog who traveled with him. They were his police, mechanic, and road repair crew. If he didn't provide these services for himself, who would? The public function of government had withered away, sapped by the regime's brazen raids on public wealth, until the very idea of government lay in ruins.

Atop this pyramid of thieves perched the dictator Joseph Désiré Mobutu, or rather—to use the "traditional" name he gave himself after clawing his way to power in 1965—Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga, which I was told was Lingala for "the cock who never leaves the hen alone." Mobuto had robbed the country blind, and the Zairois knew it. People even found rueful solace in the scope of their dictator's larceny; they half boasted, half lamented that he owned no fewer than 500 Mercedes Benzes. One day the barge



Rand Richards Cooper *lived and worked in Kenya in 1981-82 on a fellowship from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. His most recent book is* Big As Life *(Dial).*

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I was traveling on—I had bought passage from Kisangani downstream along the 1,200 mile arc of the Congo to Kinshasa—passed the presidential yacht, the *Kamanyola*. As the magnificent five-tiered steamboat slid by, I saw dark-suited security men, white-coated stewards, and a helipad with a copter painted in the green, red, and yellow of Mobutu's party (a trained pilot, Mobutu was said to be always ready to escape at a moment's notice). The boat tooted its horn, and the Zairois on our barge dutifully waved. I had befriended an eighteen-year-old student named Théophile, and as the yacht went by he ventriloquized to me, without breaking his grin or ceasing waving, "Lá-dedans, c'est le plus grand voleur des voleurs"—there goes the greatest thief of all thieves.

'They will never kill him.... Bullets will pass right through.'

Mobutu's picture was everywhere in Zaire—a comical figure in a leopard-skin cap and ascot tie, staring out from behind clunky black glasses with a look seemingly intended to convey a mesmeric intensity. His sayings were published in his version of Mao's little red book (green, in this case), and out in the bush as well, where you might stumble upon a peeling billboard quoting *le Président* ruminating about the natural beauty of the country and his own heroic role in preserving it, or expounding some tenet of Mobutuism (his program of "authenticity," for instance, which commanded the Zairois to address each other as *Citoyen* or *Citoyenne* rather than *Monsieur* or *Madame* and outlawed European-style suits in favor of a leisure-like polyester garment known as a Mobutu suit). A dozen times a day, TV and radio broadcast a soundbite in which he led an audience through a political catechism in Lingala—*Mama bo? Parti bo? Mokonzi bo?* ("How many mothers? How many parties? How many leaders?")—to frenetic shouts of *Moko!* ("One!").

These props and rituals resembled those of other, greater African leaders, like Nkrumah or Kenyatta, whose attempts to build nationalism in their fledgling countries had drawn them, some might say tragically, into propagating cults of personality. In Mobutu's case the self-mythifying impulse seemed farcical, a clumsy decoration on an ugly apparatus of personal plunder. Mobutu played with Zaire like a toy. Théophile told me of a notorious national soccer final in which the team from Mobutu's home region appeared headed for defeat until referees, after glancing up to the presidential box, annulled first one goal, then a second, triggering a riot which Mobutu's security men put down with maximum brutality. That had happened years earlier; by the 1980s Mobutu rarely appeared in public. Cannily he seemed to have understood how to make his presence felt through absence; if he could not appeal to his subjects' hearts through loyalty, he would play to their imaginations, through mystery. He would be both everywhere and nowhere; would disappear and reappear, like a magician.

I spent almost three months in Zaire: two weeks hitching rides to Kisangani (formerly Stanleyville in the Belgian Congo); a full month on the river (the trip was supposed to take less than a week, but our convoy of barges kept running aground in low water); and another month in steamy Kinshasa. Zaire is a vast, varied, lovely land. I recall the road climbing out of Goma into the Virunga game park, where at night the volcano glowed smoky orange, and by day the dilapidated bus crossed a green savanna strewn with acacia trees, herds of buffalo and elephants, and belching hot springs. Or the fantastic traffic along the Congo River, where the dense bush would suddenly give way to a riverbank village of huts, and out would come a small flotilla of narrow dugouts, paddled by shirtless men standing upright with impeccable balance. The villagers sold every kind of living and recently living cargo imaginable to Zairois on board who smoke-cured it, using smothered fires built in big steel drums. They sold the food later at a huge profit in Kinshasa—the piles of blackened fish and game stacked ever higher as our trip dragged on. I ate everything: frogs, snails, turtles; monitor lizard and crocodile and monkey; spiny caterpillars called *lubili*, fried crispy black; *mboloko*, some kind of jungle wildcat with a pungent, to me repulsive, flavor. My meals were cooked for me over a charcoal stove by Cécile, the captain's wife, in exchange for a prized bottle of Johnny Walker Red. The captain himself, a dour fifty-year-old named Louis Moma, had been working the river for decades. He regaled me with stories of the Ali-Foreman fight in Kinshasa in 1974, and also of Mobutu, who had been a childhood schoolmate—an oversized, somber boy who knew everything about watches and clocks, who took them apart and studied them. "In those days he was known as Jeff," Moma said. "He was a great watch-repairer."

By the time I got to the capital, my visa had expired, and I made the colossal mistake of trying to renew it. A flourishing cottage industry had sprung up helping shepherd foreigners through the bribeocracy, and reluctantly I surrendered my passport to a *Citoyen* Kalimi, who flattered me with reassurances while conveying gravely that it was not going to be inexpensive, not at all, not at all. For the next three weeks, as I waited for the return of my passport, I wandered around Kinshasa, returning at night to a flophouse in the Avenue Kato where I was the first "European" ever to have stayed, regarded with wonder and amusement. Mosquitoes were fierce, and the only protection were burnable repellent coils of Chinese manufacture which filled the room with a thick, scented fog, scorching your throat, but proving just sufficiently more noxious to mosquitoes than humans to repel them while allowing you a fitful sleep.

I had hardly any money—indeed, I was waiting for some to be cabled from the States to enable me to get home—and my goals each day were extravagantly modest: to wander around the market, or hang out with a group of rowdy crippled guys on the Avenue 30 Juin who raced around on wheelchairs, powered

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by bicycle drive trains whose pedals they turned with their hands, or find a cheap restaurant where I could have a dish of fiery stew and *kwanga*, the boiled cassava that had the consistency of playdough. I had been reading Henry Miller, and his wry twist on Emerson's dictum—that if it were true that a man was the sum of all he thought about during the course of a day, then he, Miller, *was* food—had been my touchstone for months; I was trying hard to pare my ambitions down to the shape of basic daily needs and means. In retrospect this project seems faintly offensive, since unlike most Zairois I had access to money, however distantly. Yet as a way of trying to comprehend the material conditions of life in Africa it had a certain coherence—eating what was generally eaten, sleeping where people slept, getting (alas) the diseases they did (including malaria and spectacular bouts of amebic dysentery); and to some extent sharing their alienated view of those with power and money, the sense of an unbridgeable distance. Sham or not, I had taken a temporary vow of poverty; it seemed to me my only shot at seeing the Africa I wanted to see.

Poverty, of course, was there in every country I passed through in Africa—but in Zaire it had a particular starkness. There is a vast difference between a poor country thriftily making do and a rich one disastrously falling apart. After all, Zaire's was no economy of peanuts and coffee and fish. Vast riches were there to be made in minerals and oil and precious metals and diamonds, were in fact *being* made, and everyone knew it. International newspapers told of Mobutu's henchmen marching into banks to demand transfers of millions in foreign currencies. At the level of the average *citoyen*, dreams of a piece of the action ran rampant. In the garbage-strewn city squares of Kinshasa, ragged men hawked smelts of bogus gold wrapped in tissue paper. Rumors circulated of diamonds big as lemons in Shaba province, if only you could get down there and smuggle them out to Brussels or Paris without getting spied out, ratted on, caught, or killed.

Intrigue swirled through daily life. People were afraid to talk openly, so they spoke secretly. Whispering and the nervous glance to the side had become part of the national personality, coexisting oddly with ebullience and flair. Much more than other Africans, the Zairois believed in magic. Théo poured the first sip of his Coke on the ground to appease ancestors, and he steered me away from a small coin I was about to pick up in the street—such objects, he warned, might be fetishes, used in the exorcism of a spirit or a disease. Like many of the Zairois I met, including educated ones, he swore by stories of sorcery: magicians who changed fetuses into lizards; an adulterous couple caught *in flagrante delicto* and then, through a curse, frozen that way. At the low end of the social spectrum, this belief in magic merged into psychosis. Kinshasa was full of madmen. Crazed people wandered the sidewalks, faces smeared with ash, feathers stuck in their hair. In the crowded *Grand Marché*, shamans did a brisk business in shoe laces, bottle caps, bits of wax and other fetishes; at night they simply left their wares

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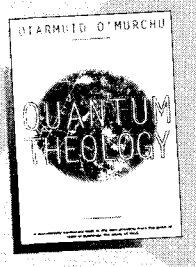

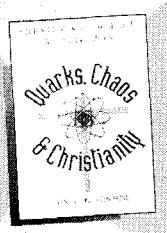

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where they stood, because people were afraid to steal them.

Although rooted in African traditions, the belief in charms and spells among the Zairois struck me as an adaptation to an environment in which rationality—or rather government, which is its political manifestation—had failed. The chaos of Mobutu's system, itself a kind of evil magic, rewarded luck, along with shrewdness, duplicity, and, all else failing, a capacity for brute violence. Violence was implicit beneath the surface of Zaire, and sometimes not very far beneath. In a society with no recourse to civil authority, disputes turn nastier quicker, violence becomes either expressive or preemptive; the intermediate levels of arguing get dispensed with. I watched a quarrel in a bar where one man went down and the other began kicking him full force in the head, again and again. At a forlorn truckstop in the bush, Dédé, our truck driver, by nature a boisterously funny man, was being harangued by someone as we sat talking, then suddenly punched the man as hard as he could, straight in the face, knocking him down; scooped him up off the floor and hurled him out the door. This was the American Wild West, it occurred to me. But where frontier violence suggests improvements to come, a later universe of order fashioned out of the unruly big bang, postcolonial violence bespoke entropy, devolution, a slide toward the void.

At least that's what I saw. To some extent, probably, it was what I was looking for. My journal from those months reminds me that I often met Zairois who countered the daily mess of their country with perseverance and verve. Still, mostly I noticed darker things. I was under the sway of V.S. Naipaul, in particular his novel *A Bend in the River* (1980), a brilliant but bleakly nihilistic study of postcolonial chaos set in an isolated town clearly meant to be Kisangani. Taking its cue from the Simba revolt of 1964 in the eastern Congo, in which scores of Westerners were murdered, the novel charts moral and political anarchy in an outpost town quaking before the relentless advance of rebel troops. Like Conrad before him, Naipaul uses Africa to illuminate the depravity of human nature, government falling away to reveal us as we truly are: appetite and fear the poles of our motivation, strategy and self-deception of our behavior. "The world is what it is," begins *A Bend in the River*. "Men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it." The idealizations of literature—including pessimistic ones like Naipaul's—succeed by their partiality, turning a truth about humanity into *the* truth, creating a world drenched in a particular moral vision. Having trained my gaze through Naipaul's gloomy lens, I was looking for trouble in Mobutu's Zaire, and finding plenty of it.

Ultimately, of course, it wasn't *my* trouble. A traveler, I could spectate and then leave, which is what I did, having finally received a visa renewal and *laissez-passer* from *Citoyen* Kalimi, along with money cabled from the States. Théo escorted me to the river crossing for The Republic Congo-Brazzaville. I made my way through a gauntlet of eager customs officials, handing out 10Z notes at every step—shedding a skin of money, molting my way onto the perilously crowded ferry and out of Zaire. On the other side I discovered how three months of Mobutuism had worked on me, when a soldier approached and instinctively I flinched—only to have him simply stamp my passport and welcome me to Congo Brazzaville. He smiled, seeming to read my reaction. Behind us, on the riverbank facing Zaire, stood a huge sign: *À Bas Avec Les Corrupteurs et Les Corruptibles!* Down With the Corrupt and the Corruptibles!

As I write, the current rebellion in eastern Zaire, driven by spillover from the Tutsi-Hutu struggle in Rwanda, works its way inexorably westward. Mobutu has entered the endgame of his three-decade chess match with destiny. It is unclear what will finish him off, the cancer rumored to be ravaging his body, or the rebel forces under Laurent Kabila, who now control almost half the country. Either way, conventional wisdom says he is finished.

I confess to not quite believing it. I look in the paper at the pictures of Mobutu, and the man is *smiling*, as if he knows something no one else does. Spend enough time soaking in your own propaganda, and maybe it seeps in; the charlatan finally believes himself a shaman. "They will never kill him," I recall a man in a bar in Kinshasa confiding to me one night. "Bullets will pass right through."

The sorcerer-as-dictator fits a tradition of Central African mystification begun by Westerners and taken up by the Zairois themselves, attempting perhaps to explain the sordid, stunted history of their new country. Whatever their larger significance, Conradian visions of a heart of human darkness in Central Africa reflect political anxieties about control of a scarcely manageable land. Zaire is a sparsely settled conglomeration of peoples speaking 400 dialects; it lacks viable roads connecting its major regions, and its people lack a unifying experience beyond the dimming memory of an oppressive colonial past. At independence in 1960, the country had fewer than two dozen university graduates, and when the Belgians left, hurriedly and in a panic, the new nation instantly fell apart, paralyzed by mismanagement and riven by secessions. Zaire was a theoretical construct; and Mobutu had the shrewdness to install himself as its foundational concept. He made himself necessary. Living under his rule meant living amidst privation and craziness; and yet it was never quite possible to imagine Zaire without him—neither the Zairois themselves could bring it off, nor other governments, the United States and France notably among them, who propped him up over the decades.

Now the struggle to imagine a Zaire *sans* Mobutu seems to have succeeded. His fate hangs day by day in the balance. Mobutu treated his country as another watch he could take apart and reassemble at his pleasure, a personal possession he could toy with; and now his subjects are discovering poetic justice in returning the favor. □

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Celia Wren

FROM NORA'S HOUSE TO OURS

'A Doll's House' & 'Stonewall Jackson's House'

An armful of Christmas presents launches Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Belasco Theatre) on its perfect dramatic arc. During the course of that trajectory, the early domestic coziness turns itself inside out.

The British actress Janet McTeer needs only thirty seconds of nearly breathless bustling around the pile of presents to establish her thrillingly animated portrait of Nora, Ibsen's fabled heroine. McTeer has won rhapsodic praise and an Olivier award for her performance, and no one who sees the splendid London production, which recently opened in New York, will be surprised. This Nora may have to hide her macaroons under the lid of the piano keyboard, out of husband Torvald's sight, but she is flirtatious and self-aware—she often gives little hoots of sly laughter—and she seems to manipulate Torvald (Owen Teale) about as much as he manipulates her.

Everything in the production seems to gain meaning from McTeer's flurrying movements early in the play, when she flings the lid off a box, and throws a blanket over her head to tease her husband. The rigid posture of Teale, who plays Torvald with great dignity and even a certain appeal, provides as much contrast to McTeer's movements as his long black frock coat does to the blond wood of the set.

At the beginning of act 2, when Nora's troubles over a fraudulent signature have begun to haunt her, McTeer's comparative stillness, as she talks aloud to the Christmas tree she is decorating, instantly reveals the character's inner state. Everything is progressing toward the final moments of the play, when Nora and her husband sit down at a table, in a pool of lamplight, to grapple with their marriage's dishonesty for the first and final time.

Ibsen's subtle craftsmanship reveals this dishonesty, and every other type of moral squalor, even when the marriage seems sturdiest. "There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt," Torvald says at the beginning of act 1, giving his wife a little lecture about cash flow. With its reminder that a home can be not-free and not-beautiful, this remark suggests that the home is already in peril.

The brightness of this production's spare but comfortable parlor, designed by Deirdre Clancy, seems to emphasize the threat—the pale color of the floorboards and the pastel furnishings suggest that gloom and evil have been unnaturally, and not very successfully, banished. An exaggeratedly receding square of ceiling, suspended above the set, makes the scene just a little stylized, just a touch like a doll's house. The snugness of the space makes it all the more shocking when the self-righteously outraged Teale nearly menaces McTeer right off into the left-hand wing.

But hopeful things can happen in this space, too. In the one scene that does not contain McTeer—the dimly lit opening to act 3—wretchedness turns to hope, as the miserable moneylender Krogstad, played with bitter intensity by Peter Gowen, sits in an armchair picking at his fingernails while his long-lost love (Jan Maxwell) offers an end to loneliness. These two can reach across the gulf that separates them, the play hints, because they have lived, suffered, and lost their illusions out in the real world—had the kind of experience Nora is seeking when she walks out of the house in the play's final scene.

Director Anthony Page has said that he hoped his production avoided reducing Nora's rebellion to "a blueprint for female liberation." Certainly McTeer's interpretation makes the conflict much more compelling—the strength she gives Nora precludes such easy answers, and involves us in the examination of the marriage and its failures. With McTeer topping a roster of sterling performances, this is a clear and resonant production.

Independent thinking, and the trials and tribulations of those who attempt it, also furnish the themes for Jonathan Reynolds's provocative satire *Stonewall Jackson's House*. This very top-

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ical play has been something of a *succès de scandale* since it opened in early spring at the American Place Theater, a forum for new plays by American playwrights. After critics raved about the show's daring skirmish against political correctness, its limited run was extended.

Playwright Reynolds was once a political strategist for Eugene McCarthy, and *Stonewall Jackson's House* contains some hilarious jibes at the nonprofit theater world, a few pricelessly deadpan monologues, and a good deal of shrewd but long-winded criticism of bleeding-heart liberalism.

The play begins at the house of Confederate general Stonewall Jackson, where a wearied African-American tour guide named LaWanda (Starla Benford) is trammeled with a group of particularly noxious tourists. The set's rotating panels present two-dimensional rooms as LaWanda recites a dead-on parody of tour-guide speech, including trivia like Jackson's love of house chores and his feat of once canning ninety-nine heads of cabbage in a single day.

After fantasizing, in an aside, about pre-Civil War days when "at least they all had jobs," LaWanda decides she'd prefer a life without responsibilities, and asks Barney (Ron Faber), a genial farmer from Ohio, to take her on as a slave. The scene dissolves in shrieks of horror as the tour-guide scenario, *à la* Pirandello, turns out to be a play under consideration by a nonprofit theater, whose liberal directors label the play racist and call the author in to berate him.

For the next act-and-a-half, the culture wars rage as the actors stride around a dilapidated piano, a work table strewn with half-empty bags of potato chips, and other staples of a bleak rehearsal-room set. "How far back should the blame go?" demands a conservative African-American woman (also played, with gusto, by Starla Benford), airing the usual conservative critique of victim mentalities, "Christians and lions? Ostrogoths and Visigoths?" The argument courses—sometimes humorously, sometimes not—from the significance of the L.A. riots to the spiritual legacy of Joseph Campbell, to the plight of Irish immigrants before the Civil War.

Although the diatribes in the play's latter half certainly make their points, Reynolds seems most successful in his apolitical humor. The opening scenes contain priceless moments, such as the parodies of American-history scholarship (an allusion to a book called *Tiny Metal Objects of the Civil War*) or a sudden paean to the "spiky grass" in Ohio.

But the subsequent debate runs on rhetorical, rather than dramatic, energy. Despite spirited performances by the cast, who transform themselves impressively from one cartoonish character to another, *Stonewall Jackson's House* may disappoint those who expect the theater of ideas, rather than ideas in a theater. The play was under consideration for this year's Pulitzer prize; ultimately, no prize was awarded in the drama category. □

Celia Wren *is a frequent* Commonweal *contributor.*

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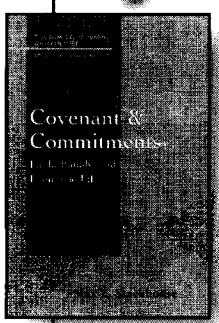

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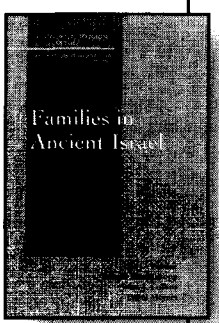

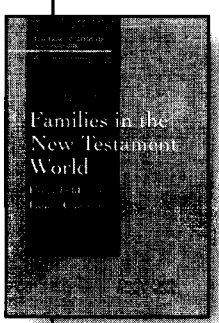

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Frank McConnell

IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

Lucas's 'Star Wars'

This year's first Big Cultural Event began twenty years ago. I'm talking, of course, about the release of the *Star Wars* trilogy, re-released earlier this year to an astonishing box-office reception.

When the first of the films appeared in 1977, it heralded a revolution in the idea of what films could do. Special-effects czar John Dykstra, Merlin to George Lucas's Arthur, had figured out how, even in those relatively chewing-gum and paper-clip days, to use computer technology to generate a world of completely convincing impossibilities. After all, that had been the dream of storytelling since the first Gilgamesh legend was carved on clay, and it had certainly been the obsession—"the idea of total cinema" (André Bazin called it that)—of the early, master directors: Griffith (*Intolerance*), Eisenstein (*Ivan the Terrible*), and Gance (*Napoléon*). And here, by Jove, it was. Nobody who wasn't there in '77—sorry, youngsters—can imagine the shock, the delight, the *rush* of seeing, in the opening shot, the Imperial Starcruiser, pursuing the little Rebel ship, roar majestically into view, finally in its immensity filling the whole screen.

O boy! you thought. It's *real*; and if it isn't, then to hell with reality anyway. And the very next shot, inside the Rebel ship, was of the two robots, C3PO and R2D2, the Abbott and Costello of the series, burbling (it's the only word) down the hall in panic. Two—three? three-and-a-half?—minutes of footage with not a single human being, and yet with an irresistible alternate world completely established: It had the audacity and genius of the opening of *Citizen Kane*. And it screwed up, perhaps irrevocably, American film.

Everyone agrees that the trilogy spawned two decades, now, of increasingly mindless and HOO-WAH! movies whose only reason for existence was their elaborate—and largely pointless—special effects. In *Star Wars*, the effects were there in the service of the very archetypal tale, as had always been the case in the greatest sci-fi movies. But by now, the tail has grown enormous and is wagging a quite shrunken dog. Or do you really *want* to see *Terminator* again? Or *Independence Day*? (Only a nebbish rides any given roller coaster more than once.)

But that's okay. The brilliant Frank Kermode once wrote of *Paradise Lost* that not the least of Milton's achievements was that he suggested a whole new way of writing English verse very badly; this is equivalent to discovering a new sin, and should be greeted with due respect. That side effect does not tarnish, however, the magnificence of *Paradise Lost*, nor—I'm using "magnificence" in just the same register here—of *Star Wars*.

In '77, I was shocked by that Imperial Cruiser at the beginning. In '97, I was bemused, before the beginning and after the end-credits, by the audience.

My wife had dragged me—well, bribed me, the coy thing, with Retsina and roasted lamb—to the first matinee on the first day of the first movie trilogy. I'd *seen* it, dammit! Knew it like the back of my hand. Always referred to it when I taught my course in "The Art of Narrative."

I hadn't gauged, though, the *presence* of what Lucas created twenty years ago. The Arlington Theater in Santa Barbara is one of the last old, grand, cavernous movie palaces, a Vatican with buttered popcorn in the lobby. And at 4:20 P.M. on this Friday, it was nearly full: full of old dinosaurs like me, *older* dinosaurs than me, students of mine, and even little kids, whom I don't like and *really* don't like at the movies. I was expecting loud, smart-aleck comments throughout the film, or, even worse, the decibel hell of a kiddie matinee.

Wrong. From the first words on the screen—all together now—"A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." to, and *through*, the final credit roll, the crowd was—it's the only word—reverential. They oohed and applauded at the right places, but always quieted down to hear the next line of dialogue; and they all *knew* the dialogue. If you've ever been inside a revival tent, or to a well-done Mass, or to

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Wrigley Field, you know the aura: The crowd, watching the ritual scroll before them in all its rigor, becomes more than a crowd, becomes an entity, a "people," not watching but, all together, celebrating the shared event, their shared memory.

It was a liturgy.

And it hit me that, in this period of multiculturalism, "otherness and the rapid pursuit of ever-newer modes of diversity"—much loved by many of my colleagues—*Star Wars* may be as much of a state religion, a shared mythology, as America has. (And not a bad one at that.)

Sure: That's the stuff of propaganda. But remember what Orwell said: *All* art is propaganda, though not all propaganda is art (which is why Augustine's *Confessions* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* do and don't belong on the same shelf).

Now Lucas is a storyteller, not a preacher. (Sam Goldwyn on movies: "If you've got a *message*, call Western Union.") And storytellers, good ones, care only about the story. (I've been trying really to learn that lesson for fifteen years.) What the shaman utters in his trance he utters for himself; it is for the community, his audience, to make sense of it. That's where the priest, or critic, or psychoanalyst—a distinctly secondary gig—comes in.

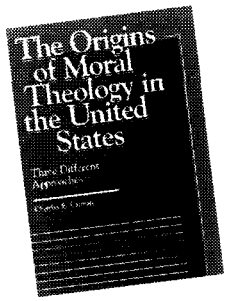
The quite lovely thing, though, is that sense is made. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the father of structuralist anthropology, once wrote that he was not interested in the stories men told, but in the stories that *told themselves* through men. And Lucas got lucky that way.

Essentially, the trilogy's story is the story of the integration of a personality, of an initiation: of growing up. It is, really, only the story of Luke (or is that Lucas?) Skywalker. In discovering his true identity, he must learn to reconcile his masculine and feminine sides—swashbuckling Han Solo and unattainable Princess Leia—and, most crucially, accept and redeem his own shadow self, himself when he is at his worst. And, as C.G. Jung knew (so did Homer), that Shadow is always the Father, both as what made us and what we fear to become: in this case, Darth Vader ("Dark Father").

It may be the oldest story in the world. You can even track it, trust me, in *Gilgamesh*. But it's infinitely fresh. Because Luke, of course, is you and me and everybody else who sees the film. And, maybe even more importantly, because the film came out at a time when we needed it: 1977, three years after Watergate.

And now, twenty years later, Darth still appears in control in D.C., alienating us from our own best selves. But we all went to the revival ("revival" in both senses of the word), and we all glowed again in the sense that we could aspire to a dignity—and a happiness—beyond the current shabby state of affairs.

That's perhaps the melancholy urgency of all myth: to show us, in the image of our aspirations, the reflection of our failure to achieve them. The Force is *not* with us. But we are dead at heart if we don't keep hoping it *can* be. □



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The Goldhagen riddle

Lawrence Douglas

James Scott of Yale set the tone of the early ecstatic reviews of Daniel Goldhagen's controversial study, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. "It is rare," Scott wrote last spring, "for a book to say something new and powerful on a subject that some of the greatest minds of our and the last generation have struggled with." To the satisfaction of many, Goldhagen had done just that. The *New York Times* called *Hitler's Willing Executioners* a "landmark," and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* simply declared it "the most important book ever written about the Holocaust."

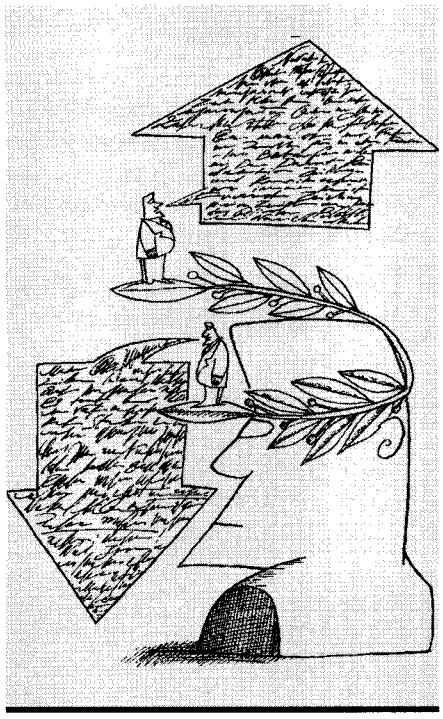
Other critics were less than convinced. Leading Holocaust scholars found the work flawed and repetitious—if not offensive. Historians argued that Goldhagen's research was unoriginal and his central claims maliciously overblown. Expressing the views of many, Rudolf Augstein, the influential German publisher, wrote, "One should be allowed to ask whether there is anything new to be gained from the book! The answer would be very little, next to nothing."

Amid the controversy (which has raged in both the United States and Europe for more than a year), the book became an international best seller. Sales were particularly brisk in Germany, where the first edition of 40,000 copies was snatched up in five days. Goldhagen's book tour in Germany generated the interest and publicity normally reserved for rock stars. And if recent articles in the *New York Review of Books* (November 28, 1996) and the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (January 26, 1997) are any indication, many critics have ceased debating the meaning of Goldhagen's controversial work and instead are struggling to comprehend the book's notoriety and success.

Book discussed in this essay

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust
Daniel Goldhagen
Vintage Paperback, $16, 634 pp.

These efforts are predictable enough. After all, nothing captivates the media more than the inscrutable logic of celebrity. And while the explanations of the Goldhagen phenomenon range from the cosmetic (the book's success is due to the Harvard professor's boyish good looks) to the psychoanalytic (younger Germans find in the book an expression of their oedipal rage against their elders), all the hypotheses share a common premise—that the shortcomings



of the book cannot explain the intensity of the attacks launched against it; and, conversely, that the merits of the volume cannot explain its success.

Yet this premise is both unfortunate and wrong. It is unfortunate because it deflects attention away from Goldhagen's difficult claims, and wrong because it overlooks the fact that the solution to the Goldhagen riddle lies not in the telegenic qualities of its author but in the book itself.

The thesis of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is by now familiar—though frequently misstated. To grasp the book's central claim, it is important to bear in mind that Goldhagen's work presents itself as a sustained refutation of fifty years' worth of interpretations of the Holocaust. In particular, Goldhagen attacks those scholars who comprehend the extermination of the Jews in terms of the logic of bureaucratic administration. In his magisterial study, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Raul Hilberg argued that the process of destruction presented Nazi planners with a number of difficult logistical, technical, and ethical problems. The complex bureaucratization of the killing was, Hilberg argued, crucial for the success of "the Final Solution," for it permitted ordinary functionaries to be physically, psychologically, and morally removed from the horrific consequences of their actions and decisions. This argument, in turn, influenced Hannah Arendt's vision of the "banality of evil" and the "terrifyingly normal" exterminator in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

This understanding of the Holocaust presupposes that ordinary Germans felt moral resistance to genocide. Not true, Goldhagen argues. For—to use the social scientific jargon that both defines and

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mars much of Goldhagen's prose—it was the "cognitive and value structures" of ordinary Germans—namely their virulently anti-Semitic beliefs—that constituted the "central causal agent of the Holocaust."

At first blush, the claim seems not revolutionary but obvious to the point of truism. For certainly the Nazis would not have attempted to kill every Jewish man, woman, and child they could lay their hands on had they not been thoroughly anti-Semitic. Yet it is Goldhagen's claim that this "demonic" anti-Semitism was not a property of the Nazis alone, but instead defined the "cognitive framework" of all (or nearly all) Germans, regardless of class, religion, and level of education. As such, the Holocaust cannot be seen merely as a genocidal policy designed and implemented by Hitler and the SS. Rather, it was a German national project. If Hitler's fanaticism and the territorial conquest of much of Europe created the opportunity for mass killing, neither the systematic demonization of the Jews by Nazi political culture, nor the Nazi party's repressive control of German society produced the motivations that were necessary to undertake a broad campaign of genocide. These motivations, Goldhagen argues, were supplied by a belief system that predated the Nazis and that defined a peculiarly German brand of "eliminationist" anti-Semitism.

To prove his point, Goldhagen focuses the bulk of his study not on the extermination camp, the "factory of death" which for many scholars distinguishes the Holocaust from other instances of human atrocity, but on the massacres committed by German reserve police battalions in the early days of the Final Solution. The activities of these police battalions unsettle our conventional images of the perpetrators of Nazi genocide. These reserve policemen were not, on the whole, members of the Nazi party, much less fanatical inductees into the SS; they had not been inured to killing by the trials of battle; they were, for the most part, ordinary married men with families. Yet when called upon to massacre Jewish men, women, and children, they did so willingly—even when provided ample opportunities to refuse.

How can we explain the behavior of these men, the good foot soldiers in the war against the Jews? Christopher Browning's important study, *Ordinary Men* (1992), attempted to make sense of the actions of members of the Police Battalion by focusing upon "situational factors." Men who otherwise would never have engaged in acts of mass murder found themselves compelled to do so by the tremendous pressures exerted by their peer group. To refuse to participate in killing, under such circumstances, was nothing short of turning one's back on a horrific collective obligation—"in effect, an asocial act *vis-à-vis* one's comrades." Having killed once, these men quickly became inured to the act, and became, in time, competent and callous exterminators.

Goldhagen emphatically rejects Browning's thesis. For while Browning's situational factors might explain why the reserve policemen killed willingly, his argument wholly fails to account for

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the most disturbing and anomalous aspects of their behavior—that they killed zealously and with untold cruelty.

Goldhagen argues that one, and only one, explanation can make sense of these actions—that these reservists were driven to kill zealously and cruelly by a shared cultural framework that constructed the Jew as a demonic presence deserving extermination. Thus, in the place of Browning's ordinary men, persons discomfitingly similar to ourselves, we meet Goldhagen's ordinary Germans, persons of such radically alien and perverted beliefs that we can reconstruct their mindset only with the "critical eye of an anthropologist."

Goldhagen's thesis, in turn, has been subject to stern rebuttal. Some of these attacks have been characterized by a disturbing vehemence. In an apoplectic review in *First Things* (August/September 1996), Richard John Neuhaus railed against *Hitler's Willing Executioners* as an "incoherent, hateful and dishonest tract," faulting it for its claim that "anti-Semitism has nothing to do with Jews" and for failing to acknowledge the reasonableness of the perception of Jewish responsibility for Weimar's culture of "defeatism and decadence."

Most mainstream critiques of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* fortunately have not used the book as a pretext to revive, however unwittingly, such canards. Yet as bizarre and offensive as Neuhaus's critique may be, there is an unfortunate quality to Goldhagen's book that invites such vehement rejections. As Omer Bartov observed in an excellent early review of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in the *New Republic*, the book suffers from serious problems of tone. Not only does Goldhagen boldly overstate his claim to originality, but he treats his fellow scholars of the Holocaust with a patronizing and dismissive attitude that borders on contempt. Abandoning the sober voice of the scholar for the impassioned advocacy of a prosecutor, Goldhagen often seems less interested in indicting the German nation than in self-righteously holding forth on the intellectual bankruptcy of competing explanations of the Holocaust. He accuses Browning, for example, of credulously privileging the self-serving testimony of the former reservists while suppressing evidence that does not fit with his larger thesis. Browning, however, is hardly the sole object of Goldhagen's disdain. Along with Hilberg and Arendt, he joins the ranks of scholars whose grossly insufficient arguments fail to make sense of the Holocaust.

The book's strident self-righteousness leaves the reader all the less sympathetic to the flaws in its author's reasoning. These flaws, in turn, have been carefully detailed, often by precisely those scholars who have been on the receiving end of Goldhagen's scorn. Hans Mommsen, the eminent German historian, faults *Hitler's Willing Executioners* for its "monocausal" explanation of the Holocaust. No historical event as complex as the Holocaust, he argues, can be explained simply in terms of a unique strain of hate that purportedly infected an entire nation. Browning, by contrast, has accused Goldhagen of writing a "keyhole" history of German anti-Semitism—a narrative without context and perspective that creates a "uniform portrayal of Germans—undifferentiated, unchanging, possessed by a single, monolithic, cognitive outlook." This stereotyping of the German "cognitive framework," Browning writes, discomfitingly echoes "how anti-Semites write about Jews."

In addition to these critiques of Goldhagen's general thesis, the book's conclusions are also vulnerable. As I have already suggested, one of the most distinctive and valuable aspects of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is Goldhagen's attempt to demonstrate that ordinary Germans killed Jews zealously and sadistically—that is, more zealously and sadistically than they killed (or would have killed) other civilian populations. Whether this claim is properly supported by the evidence can be debated (and this point describes a central dispute between Goldhagen and Browning). Still, it seems that Goldhagen has importantly described an extremely disturbing circumstance, one that challenges understandings that explain the Holocaust largely in terms of the impersonal logic of bureaucratic administration.

Yet even if Goldhagen is right, he draws two conclusions from this material which, I believe, are crucially flawed. First, he concludes that the fact that ordinary Germans killed zealously and with passion is proof that they believed in the "justice of the extermination of Jews." This shocking conclusion is presented as if logically entailed by the evidence, yet this seems hardly to be the case. To claim that ordinary Germans believed in the justice of genocide suggests that they considered themselves morally obligated to kill. To have refused to kill, if Goldhagen is correct, would not simply have constituted a refusal, *pace* Browning, to shoulder a burden placed on one's peer group—it would have been tantamount to an *ethical* failing, a refusal to discharge a moral imperative.

While some Germans might have subscribed to such a view, it seems difficult to believe that the ordinary-German-turned-killer did so because he saw himself as a crusader for justice. More plausibly, the actions of these ordinary Germans can be understood as offering sobering evidence of how people behave when the strictures of morality have been dangerously relaxed, when one finds oneself, to borrow Hannah Arendt's language, in a world in which "everything is permitted." If we follow Arendt's insight, the danger of racial animus is not that it radically inverts notions of right and wrong, but that it leads us to see the other as undeserving of the common protections of morality. Goldhagen's overstated claim fails as a reconstruction of the psychology and moral mindset of the killers.

Moreover, Goldhagen responds to the ample evidence of the Germans' cruelty toward their victims with a series of rhetorical questions. Why bother to beat, humiliate, starve, degrade, and deride with "Mephistophelean laughter" persons whom you are about to kill anyway? Only a demonic hatred of such persons, he argues, can explain such gratuitous cruelty. That such acts of cruelty might not have been entirely gratuitous is a reality Goldhagen never bothers to consider. Thus, other than in

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a dismissive footnote, he ignores Primo Levi's provocative and brilliant discussion of Nazi cruelty in *The Drowned and the Saved*. The omission is grave, for Levi supplies precisely what is missing from *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. While Goldhagen can never reason past the understandable outrage he feels at the Germans' gross degradation of persons slated for death, Levi attempts to probe the dark logic of such cruelty. These rituals of humiliation, he concludes, were hardly gratuitous: They served to constitute the victims as the very desperate and broken specimens that anti-Semitism painted the Jews to be. For it is far easier to kill a person, Levi argues, once we have reduced that person, through our own vicious acts, to a pathetic and wretched creature. Levi's paradoxical formulation captures the subtlety of his insight, an insight lost on Goldhagen: "Before dying, the victim must be degraded, so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt."

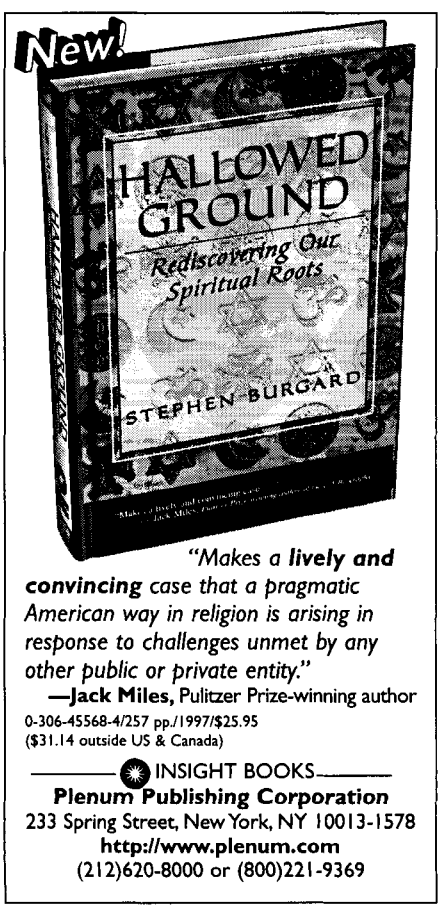
Yet the very qualities that make *Hitler's Willing Executioners* a flawed book also account for its success, particularly in Germany. The German response to Goldhagen presents a caricature of our own troubled reception: The attack by German academics has been more sustained and widespread; the public's embrace of the book has been even more enthusiastic. Unfortunately, many of the German criticisms of Goldhagen have a distinctly *ad hominem* ring: Some critics have dismissed the book because the author is Jewish, and others because the author is American. In the former case, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is seen as an unbalanced diatribe penned by the son of a survivor; in the latter, it is a Hollywood treatment of history—grossly simplified, and populated with exaggerated villains. Some critics have specifically compared Goldhagen's book to the ABC miniseries, "The Holocaust," which was similarly condemned when it was first broadcast on German television nearly twenty years ago. To these critics, America's institutions of higher learning and its industry of popular culture will never be able to treat the Holocaust with any degree of nuance, complexity, and fidelity to the truth.

Whatever the flaws of Goldhagen's book, to describe it as an article of popular cultural consumption is absurd. With its footnotes, matrices, and social scientific jargon, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* remains, in many ways, an unlikely candidate for the best-seller list. Yet *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is a passionate book, indeed, a deeply *personal* book, and though the clash between the voice of the scholar and that of the advocate creates discord on the page, it also describes the book's most compelling quality. In German, where academic prose, even more than in this country, is defined by a relentless aridity, Goldhagen's passionate voice has understandably found a large and supportive public. In this respect, resurrecting the memory of the ABC miniseries is peculiarly apt, as the television movie, despite the attack of critics, riveted the German nation in a manner not dissimilar to the book.

But the book's success is not merely a matter of rhetoric. The same passion that breathes through Goldhagen's prose also has shaped his argument. One could, I suppose, argue that Goldhagen's indictment of Germany would make the book a less-than-attractive sell in the Federal Republic (though, as *Der Spiegel*, the German news weekly, has observed, the book's most inflammatory rhetoric reads somewhat muted in translation). Against this, one could argue that the book is a hit in Germany precisely because it implicitly supports what Chancellor Kohl has described as "the grace of belated birth" (*die Gnade der späten Geburt*). For Goldhagen insists on drawing an absolute divide between the Germany of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and the Germany constituted since the war's end (an argument made only in a footnote in the book, but one which he continually emphasized during his German book tour and in his interview in *Der Spiegel*). Thus the book that purportedly delivers a terrible indictment, in fact offers the most pleasing absolution, providing Germans—and Americans—with the comforts conspicuously absent from Browning's quietly chilling account.

While this no doubt explains a measure of the book's success in Germany, its larger resonance with the reading public on both sides of the ocean must be understood in terms of Goldhagen's passionate plea that explaining the Holocaust is not like explaining quantum physics. In the face of those scholars and thinkers who blanch before the monstrous evil of the Holocaust, who believe that the Holocaust defies rational explanation or can be made sense of only through elaborate theories of group psychology and the structure of modernity, Goldhagen offers a simple and powerful rejoinder. There is much flawed with his claim, and his own examples, I believe, undermine it. Yet he emphatically reminds us, to paraphrase Robert Frost, that hate suffices. □

Lawrence Douglas *is an assistant professor in the Department of Law, Jurisprudence, and Social Thought at Amherst College. He is currently working on a book about Holocaust trials, to be published by Yale University Press.*



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Poetry
Ned O'Gorman

The Sleeping Lifeguard

He dreams of windows that flutter
open into eddies of sunlight
and fillets of spume. I came
round on the twentieth lap
and he lay perfectly asleep
as the waves slammed against
the world's cool belly. He
stirred in his slumber and plunged
through the water to the rock
bed beneath all waters
that reach back into the Eden
waters, those thorns
of tempest that compelled
the whirlpools and fleets
and the babble of sperm to speak dominion.

Apollo on the Bechstein

This oval magnanimity lies
on the Bechstein, all curves,
caught, held static as
the rubble of rings round Saturn.
Now, you see, Brancusi
carved it out of the meshes I
have glimpsed in the barks
of some trees and in lead.
Yet it is liquid as grass
and like it could be troubled
into a tidal wave by a nether
wind. I laid my hands upon
it and lifted it just an inch
off the surface. It slid
in my palm like the glistening
inner space of a peach nut
split open. For what it was
seemed not so much a head of
a sleeping god but the captive
second when I had lain
my head against a cold stone parquet
by the sea and felt the fire
within me that outfurled diamonds

Aber wozu dann dieses komplizierte Ding?

—Wittgenstein

"But what then is
the point of the
complicated thing?"
I have been given
a stranger nerve
and tendons
that carry
sweeps of terror
through me
to a gland
where the fool gods
made me quarry
to the heart's solemities
folded like pins in my flesh.
For as I drove
to an island
where I'd been given haven
I passed a village
and could not go
beyond it
and swerved off in the sun
and glare
my body and its acrobatic
breath
contorted like wrens
accosted
by a whirlwind.
I stood,
my hands locked together
and thought of ways
death might come: an aboriginal
wave, a refusal
of light,
a freezing shadow.
This morning I
walked to a small cliff
gnawed
by the sea
to slate ravines
and pools
of shells and weed
where lichen
and disemboweled
husks of sea urchin
lay on
the copper field
of the bay.
On the sun's nape
I laid my hands
and felt
my skin shift
its hold
on gravity
letting down
upon me
a chaplet
of lupin
and endless waters
that can
complete nothing
but render
stable
the infinite mountains
that rise up beneath
the wake of the swans.

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Lights! Cameras! Dreams!

Reality and Dreams
Muriel Spark
Houghton Mifflin, $22, 160 pp.

Sara Maitland

Muriel Spark, as well as being an extremely good novelist, is a conspicuously difficult one to review. This is partly because she is so impressively "crafty"—technically accomplished. Her ideas, themes, and even authorial attitudes are so deeply embedded in her plot and characters that the only way to describe what this novel is like and about is to order the reader to read it. In this sense (though not in any other), it is a bit like reviewing George Eliot. How can anyone say in 800 words what *Middlemarch* is about?

Another reason why I think Spark is hard to review is that she is a satirist—and this is no longer a well-understood mode of writing. It is easy to see her novels as heartless, even brutal: An external, omnipotent author plays games with basically harmless, if un-self-knowing characters, for the amusement of the author and an elite group of superior readers. The eighteenth-century understanding of satire has given way in our time to parody, irony, and verbal wit—far easier, though more dangerous genres. Satire, in the hands of its great practitioners like Swift, was a passionately moral form, articulating the most fundamental social concerns and implicating the reader within the narrative. (The decline of satire can best be seen in the fact that *Gulliver's Travels* is now read almost exclusively as a children's or a science-fiction book. This infantilization of the novel would have appalled Swift and baffled his contemporaries.) It would be a shame if we lost the capacity to read satire, and Spark continually reopens the genre, although we may have to make a self-conscious effort to follow her.

I do not think that *Reality and Dreams* is either a heartless or a frivolous novel—despite the fact that it is not gentle with its characters, and that it is at times almost excruciatingly funny. At its center is a group of extremely self-indulgent white Western (British, not surprisingly) contemporary people who have lost all grip on the line between fantasy and reality. Do their imaginations, dreams, and ambitions create their daily lives, or do their realities generate their dreams? Is it possible to distinguish?

As the central metaphor for this question Spark has intelligently deployed the world of the movies. Tom Richards, a successful film director, has fallen off a crane on the set of his latest movie; he has badly injured himself and has set the entire project of the film at risk. As a consequence, the film gets a new director, a new title, a new everything; but is it still Richards's? The movie was intended to explore an obsession Richards had developed for the image of a girl he had once seen but never spoken to at a campsite in France. Is the actress who plays this girl the same as the girl at the campsite—a girl who never existed as a per-

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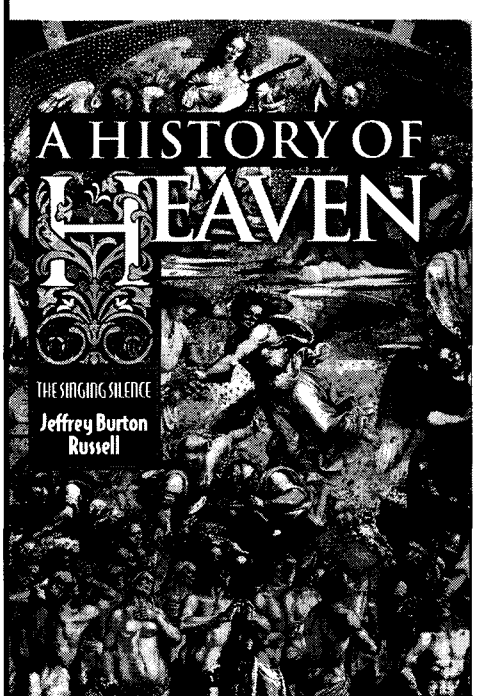

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son with a history, but only as an image in a frame? Can Richards transfer the obsession to the actress? At one point, Richards tries to explain the concept of the film to a new friend of his, a rather straightforward taxi-driver. "The charm of this girl," Richards says, "is that she has no history."

"Then she isn't real," says his friend.

"No, she's not real, not yet." No history, no reality, on the one hand. On the other, the film, the celluloid image, may make her real.

People who believe that characters in soap operas are real and send them condolence letters when disasters strike are a well-known butt of ridicule among the sophisticated, but Spark seems to be insisting, in what is a very sophisticated novel, that this habit of projection is a real cultural question. We all treat as real the products of our own imaginations. What can this mean?

Spark's novel also insists that our dreams and realities cannot control the dreams and realities of others. Apart from the very earliest scenes when he is semiconscious in the hospital (and even then his reveries are constantly impinged upon by the activities of the nurses and doctors who care for him), Richards is not free to explore his memories and fantasies in isolation. His wife, Clair; their unsatisfactory daughter, Marigold; Cora, Richards's adored and beautiful daughter from an earlier marriage; Dave, the taxi-driver; the various actresses involved in the film; and an ever-extending network of family and friends are all involved in highly complex ways with Richards, with his reality, and with his fantasies. Moreover, they have their own reveries and realities that impinge upon him and his. The characters compete for the reader's attention, all insisting upon their own "director's cut" of the situation. The results are mayhem: a highly charged, shifting, uncertain brew, which Spark seems to suggest is made more volatile by unfettered libido and job insecurity—two things that might appear to be social realities, but are also the stuff of dreams. Perhaps not surprisingly the plot flares into violence of various kinds at various moments, and after the dénouement no one is entirely clear what has happened at all.

I knew when I started this review that it would not be easy to describe the book. There is nothing particularly wrong with what I have written, but it has missed the sharpness of perception and the edgy wit of Spark's writing. It has also left out the light-handedness

"Cut! The goldfish is overacting!"

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that characterizes all her novels. There is a kind of vibrant, flamboyant confidence in her writing that lets her get away with over-the-top characters, outrageous plotting, and a ridiculously inadequate ending—none of which you notice until someone demands an explanation.

This is a truly elegant and enjoyable novel. It plumbs no emotional depths but illuminates the shallow waters of most novel readers' lives in tantalizing and sparkling light (pun intended, in honor of the author). □

Sara Maitland's *most recent book is* Angel Maker: The Collected Short Stories *(Henry Holt).*

FAMILY TROUBLES

Human Croquet
Kate Atkinson
Picador USA, $24, 351 pp.

Valerie Sayers

Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, a comic novel bubbling with ebullient language, won the 1995 Whitbread Prize in England and critical praise on both sides of the Atlantic. Her new novel, *Human Croquet*, wraps some of that novel's concerns—especially the clutches of past generations—in a new narrative skin.

Like the first novel, *Human Croquet* alternates past and present. It opens with woodcutters and fairies, primeval forests, a lady dressed in green disappearing into a dark wood. In short, it distinctly resembles a fairy tale. Other literary allusions (to classics, to mysteries, to science fiction, and especially to Shakespeare) abound. At times Isobel Fairfax, the sixteen-year-old narrator of the "Present" sections of the book, sounds like a chirpy Edgar Allen Poe surveying the madness around her.

Isobel is the descendant of a distinguished family whose social standing is on a steady downward slide; her grandparents have been comfortable suburban grocers in the "grim North" of England, but even this bourgeois business is lost in Isobel's lifetime. She and her brother have been raised to believe that her mother deserted them when they were small. Her father vanished the day after her mother's disappearance but has since reappeared, claiming amnesia, and bringing home with him from New Zealand a hapless new wife named Debbie. (Isobel is at her scathing adolescent best on the subject of her stepmother.) Motherless, Isobel is consumed with defining motherhood, especially as it is connected to desire and the domestic violence all around her. Her images of sexually mature women fall pretty neatly under the rubrics of Madonna, whore, and stepmother.

Though the novel opens in the very beginning ("with the word and the word is life"), the present action of the story commences on April Fool's Day, 1960. It is Isobel's sixteenth birthday. She spends much of her time dodging stepmother Debbie, who believes that the furniture is rearranging itself and that the members of the family have been replaced by sinister doubles. Those other family members do not provide Isobel much solace. Her "aunt from hell," Vinny, who likes all recipes that begin, "Take a large cod and boil whole," has raised Isobel and her brother with equal disdain for their emotional stability and for the truth; her brother Charles repels young women but keeps his mother's memory alive; her father, once dashing, is now a shadowy figure sinking in a swamp of sadness. Isobel is drawn to the plump, maternal figure next door, Mrs. Baxter, who is continually covered in bruises she explains in a way that feels fictionally familiar: She has walked into doors, she has bumped herself again.

Stories of the Rose

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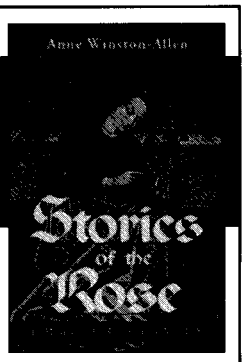

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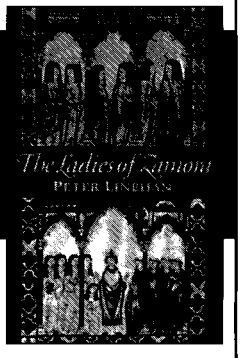

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Mrs. Baxter's daughter Audrey is Isobel's friend and, Isobel gradually comes to suspect, the victim of incest with her father, the cruel villain of the story.

The emotional stakes, then, are high; the tone is jaunty; the juxtaposition is unsettling and familiar (perhaps we heard this story in childhood). Throughout the course of the novel, Isobel falls into time warps (she takes them in stride, and they are not terribly bumpy going for the reader either, though they sometimes feel a bit random). It is fitting that Isobel should travel through history, for she has been brought up without knowledge of the most crucial character in her own history, her mother Eliza, who is beautiful and bewitching in the fairy-tale manner. Eliza's story is told in the "Past" sections of the novel, in a narrative that is far more stylized and ironic than Isobel's. Her tale becomes increasingly outrageous as the past progresses (or regresses); our fairy-tale narrator first reveals that Eliza is a loving Madonna figure to her children and later that she has been a prostitute whose heart seems sometimes made of gold and sometimes of brass. In the Eliza sections, Atkinson climbs all the way out on a fictional limb. The branch bobs precariously with the most removed history, Eliza's own infancy, which goes far beyond a reader's expectations of myth. Near brushes with incest (a major motif) mark the longest, and perhaps the most manipulative, of the narrative reaches. Atkinson never really loses her footing, though—the novel is beguiling no matter how outrageous its plot becomes—and as the layers of Eliza's disappearance story are peeled away the truth is not only shocking but deeply satisfying. We are made aware, finally, of Eliza's attempt to find "redemption in this awful world."

Isobel's journey is also revealed in layers, and the climax of her story is also outrageous. Her adolescent fascination with sexuality has led her to a heightened awareness of rape (there is a deeply troubling scene with teen-age boys taking after her, but Isobel, Daphne-like, conveniently turns into a tree). Isobel has witnessed plenty of sexual violence to inform her view of a young woman's place in midcentury England—she has touched her murdered mother's body, though she has repressed the memory, and she has Audrey and Mrs. Baxter to remind her of the horrors that might accompany the most domesticated scenes.

Atkinson's language—sometimes giddy, sometimes understated to accommodate the black comedy, occasionally frankly emotional ("I need my mother, I need my mother")—is a joy. Genial throughout, the story becomes positively expansive as it works its way toward resolution. Audrey, the incest victim, becomes one of the first women priests in the Church of England and does "a small amount of good." After witnessing the ghastly sexual order humans can impose, Isobel leaves her readers with a delicate paean to the forest, to nature's unruly and mysterious order. The last pages of the novel give us, finally, the rules to "Human Croquet," a game Mrs. Baxter has recalled nostalgically. It's a wacky metaphor worthy of Kate Atkinson's generous ambition for this novel. Like the best fairy tales, *Human Croquet* is appalling and disturbing even as it is reassuring. The forest is dark and deep. □

Valerie Sayers *is professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. Her latest novel is* Brain Fever *(Doubleday).*

OUT OF ONE, MANY

Dr. America
The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-61
James T. Fisher
University of Massachusetts Press, $29.95, 293 pp.

Suzanne Keen

I am perhaps uniquely ill-qualified to review *Dr. America*, for I know the author, but not the subject. Knowing the author is a matter of pleasurable coincidence: My time teaching at Yale overlapped with Jim Fisher's. Not knowing the subject, Dr. Tom Dooley, seems to be a consequence of my age (though I'm happy to admit ignorance as well). As an informal poll of friends and acquaintances taught me, for general readers under the age of forty, familiarity with the "myth" upon which Fisher's analysis depends is *not* a given. My husband, four years older than I, recalls the potted hagiography of Dr. Dooley in CCD materials; but even in a Catholic hospital, according to a medical informant, young physicians may not know of the once famous "jungle doctor."

Fully to enjoy Fisher's detailed biography of the "lives" of Dr. Dooley, one must know at the outset what I had to construct for myself as I went along. So, for the benefit of readers who know the late 1950s only through history books, movies, and "Happy Days" episodes: The myth of Dr. Tom Dooley celebrates a charismatic, selfless young physician who cared for Indochinese refugees and Lao villagers before tragically and prematurely dying of malignant melanoma. This Dr. Dooley published three popular narratives about his experiences (*Deliver Us from Evil*, *The Edge of Tomorrow*, and *The Night They Burned the Mountain*), espoused a pragmatic anticommunism,

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and raised a huge amount of money and popular support for relief organizations. In the Saint Louis area (Dooley's home), one might have heard him on the radio; on television he must have been hard to miss. Handsome, lively, Catholic, and above all American, Dooley represented the opposite of Lederer and Burdick's *Ugly American*. Two overlapping cults—one secular, one Catholic—grew up around the man Lao villagers called "Dr. America."

But what is a hero without detractors? If Fisher assumes that we all know the first Dr. Dooley, he also hopes that we are aware of the debunked and discredited Dooley. That charming, red-blooded American who frequently remarked that he enjoyed pinching the bottoms of young ladies was, in fact, a promiscuous homosexual. His resignation from the Navy was prompted by an investigation of his indiscretions. His writings, his book tours, and even the relief organizations he served as a glamorous spokesperson were entangled with CIA operations. He was a compulsive liar. And even his medical work has been questioned.

Though Fisher has local quibbles with the elements of these two myths—Tom Dooley, secular saint, and Tom Dooley, sinister self-promotor—the virtue of his study lies in its willingness to live with a complicated Dr. Dooley who was both admirable and distasteful. Rather than proffering the two versions and assuring us that the real Tom Dooley lies somewhere in between, Fisher takes Dooley's unceasing storytelling (some would call it lying) and presents us a "shape-shifter" who could be any number of Dooleys for any number of occasions. Along the way, Fisher fills in the contexts for each of the prominent versions of Dooley, which makes the book a rich experience for readers interested in cold-war America, intelligence history, 1950s' Catholicism, the roots of widespread American interest in Vietnam, and the entanglement of pop culture (TV, *Reader's Digest*) and foreign policy. Though it seems ludicrous to me that "the rakish Irishman" Tom Dooley could really have prepared Americans to elect John F. Kennedy, as Fisher suggests at the end of his book, it is surely the case that the ideal of service embodied by Dooley inspired Kennedy in the founding of the Peace Corps. So what if he was really a weirdo obsessed with performing "emergency circumcisions"; an exploiter who, to make an impression on visitors, was ready to trot out a Lao villager who had been mauled by a bear; and a jerk who was prone to embarrassing waitresses by announcing that he could tell they were menstruating? Yuck!

Though Fisher suppresses none of the unflattering details, and is prepared to make grand claims for Dooley's significance, it is striking that, in this exhaustively researched and densely informative book, he does not comment on the area where one might expect Dooley to have had a lasting legacy: medicine. Perhaps because Dooley barely escaped medical school with a degree, after repeating his final year, Fisher regards the medical man as the most vulnerable of the many Dr. Dooleys he scrutinizes. But surely this Dooley matters: He inspired doctors to seek alter-

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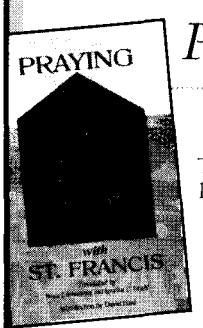

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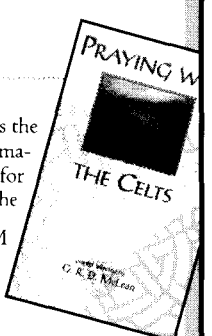

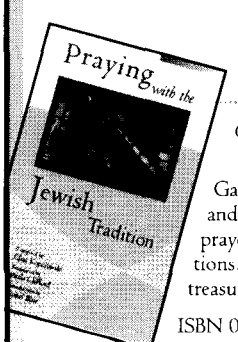

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natives to a Park Avenue practice, a legacy which is effective today whether young physicians know him or not. Ill-prepared as I was to appreciate Fisher's complication of Dooley's character, I did not find *Dr. America* an easy read. But the story caught me in chapter 2, when Dooley finds his vocation(s) in Indochina. *Commonweal* readers who remember Tom Dooley may find this study engrossing from the start. □

Suzanne Keen *teaches English at Washington & Lee University.*

DOCTOR'S INSCAPE

A Measure of My Days
The Journal of a Country Doctor
David Loxterkamp, M.D.
University Press of New England, $24.95, 320 pp.

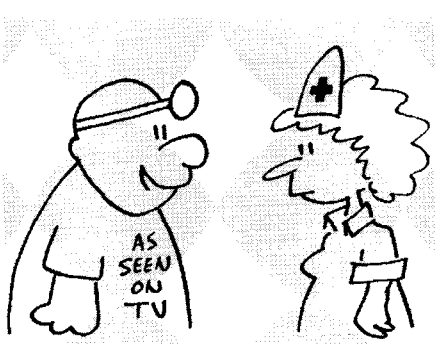
Clare Collins

At the ungodly hour of 4:30 A.M., David Loxterkamp rises from his bed, feeds the cats, prepares the coffee, flips on his laptop computer and, to the accompaniment of the "Carmelite Vespers" of George Frederick Handel, commences writing about his life as a family doctor, a family man, and a Catholic in the small town of Belfast, Maine, where he has lived for the past thirteen years.

A Measure of My Days: The Journal of a Country Doctor is the product of this daily ritual. The book takes its title from Psalm 39, in which the psalmist seeks "the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am," and details one year in Loxterkamp's life and medical practice. It records, as he explains in the introduction, "the particulars of a life lived on the coast of Maine. Of Belfast and its seven thousand inhabitants, including my wife, Lindsay, and daughter, Clare. It is a story about my work and about those who share it."

Loxterkamp's journal is a thought-provoking pleasure. He describes his surroundings, his patients and co-workers, his family and friends, with fine, pointed detail, and with an almost disarming honesty. He doesn't mince words. "I despise few patients," he writes, "but one of them resurfaced over the weekend. He was my patient until he pushed me too far." He freely admits relief when his wife miscarries, citing the need first to "put our marital house in order." Of his Catholic faith, he concedes, "I am a cafeteria Catholic" who takes what he needs of the doctrine and sheds the rest.

The journal also serves as a timely meditation on the state of small-town, family medicine. Loxterkamp struggles to remain personally engaged in a system increasingly dominated by managed care and specialists. He must also contend with patients who drink or smoke too much (so many of the patients he writes about suffer from either lung cancer or emphysema), or who are immobilized by desperate poverty. Belfast, he points out, is located in Waldo County, among the nation's poorest. It's comforting to know that there are doctors such as Loxterkamp out there, who still believe the practice of medicine is a form of community and Christian service. Much of the book, in fact, discusses his efforts to create a community hospice program that serves not just the needs of the dying, but of the surviving family members as well.



"It makes the patients more confident."

I had expected Loxterkamp's book to be a sort of James Herriot-like study of rural life concentrating on humans rather than farm animals. This is to say, I expected a book detailing the idylls of rural existence, full of attractively vexing characters and anecdotes, the story of the kindly doctor making house calls and dispensing wisdom along with bromides. The kind of story to make one yearn for the simple life.

Instead, the journal recalls the short stories of Maine author Sarah Orne Jewett, whose unadorned chronicles of a declining seacoast community and of the ordinary men and women who live there are by turn wistful, tragic, and inspiring. Also, as with Jewett's remarkable short story, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Loxterkamp's journal manages to carry the reader forward in a leisurely, anecdotal manner.

Loxterkamp has an ability to uncover just the right details to convey a complex emotion or to describe a character or setting. As with Jewett's fictional Dunnet Landing, the town of Belfast and its surroundings become a character in itself, a personality clearly defined, its influence on the lives of its inhabitants well-outlined. Indeed, so completely does Loxterkamp describe his town (often by detailing the routes of long runs he likes to take when time permits) that I would have appreciated the addition of a map. Where, exactly, do the Loxterkamps live? Where are the cemetery and Searsport Family Practice? Or the home where the weekly Renew meeting (a Catholic discussion group to which Loxterkamp is devoted) gathers?

Just as compelling as the setting is the internal landscape Loxterkamp describes. As he strives to be Everyman's doctor, he struggles with his faith, his marriage, and thoughts of having a second child. He is afflicted with recurring, sometimes immobilizing bouts of depression, and suffers, too, from anxiety attacks that take the form of dreaming that he is choking on a small, plastic object. These might stem, he suggests (but never goes so far as to determine), from his unhappy childhood in Iowa. He

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was an adopted son whose father, also a family physician, died of a heart attack when Loxterkamp was a child; his mother, forced to return to work, drank too much, and expected too much of her children. At times Loxterkamp gets a bit petulant, and I couldn't help wondering if his slightly obsessive nature might be tougher to take in person than on the printed page.

The thing I like best about personal journals is that they tend to raise questions, to dissect emotions and fears and doubts without any obligation to resolve them. They provide, as Loxterkamp himself puts it, "the vapor plume of an author's life, fresh and obvious in the making." Of his effort, Loxterkamp writes, "it has provided me with an awareness that one often reaches in the fifth mile of a run or the tenth year of a medical practice or when infatuation peels from the person you love." It is this sense of heightened awareness that Loxterkamp encourages, by example, in his reader.

It snowed the very morning I finished this book. Driving my daughter, Annie, to school, we passed by a field that I usually overlook in my rush to be on time. Snow lined the tree branches and covered the ground. I might not have noticed how lovely it was, had it not been for David Loxterkamp's gentle and poetic reminder that the details of my own life merit greater attention. □

Clare Collins *is a free-lance writer. She lives in Pawcatuck, Connecticut.*

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

(emphasis added). I blinked. That didn't sound like what I had just read. I went back to the Himmelfarb quotation: "[T]he devolution of relief to the states is not merely a considerable move toward federalism...[but] a considerable step toward the abolition of relief as an entitlement."

Hmm. What a deep reader the writer of the editorial must be, I mused, to find a declaration of war in that statement. Try as I may, I still cannot.

Do those of us who favor a balanced budget—President Clinton, many Republicans and Democrats, etc.—really reject "the idea of the government's responsibility for the common good"? I don't think so, although we may have different ideas than the writer of the editorial of how best to serve that common good.

I was reminded somehow of the divine who, noted for his learned and eloquent preaching, heard himself declaiming in the middle of a sermon, "What I think the good Lord is trying to say here...." He instantly gave up the use of "in other words...." I think there might be a lesson there.

For the record: I favor a balanced budget but believe a constitutional amendment to enforce one is a miserable idea that deserves a permanent burial.

JAMES FINN
New York, N.Y.

The editors reply:

Perhaps we read too deeply, perhaps not. But we agree with our friend Jim Finn that Gertrude Himmelfarb clear-

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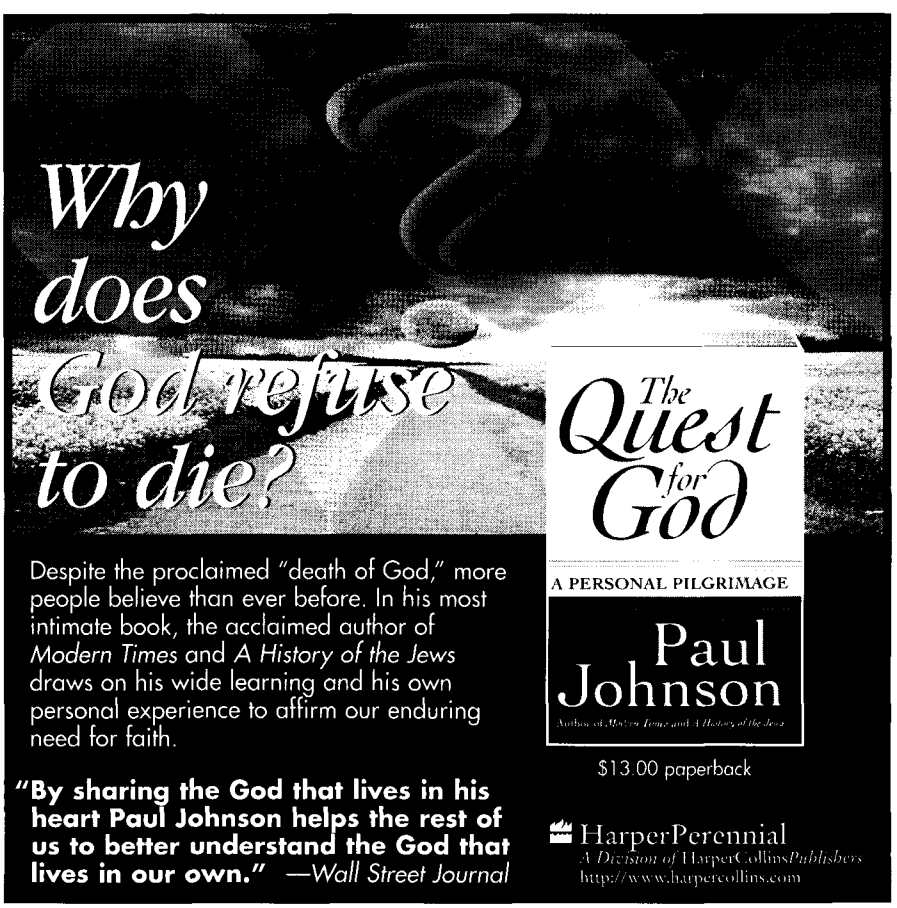
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ly expresses what she intends to say. In this case, we read "the abolition of relief as an entitlement" as a very familiar neoconservative call to arms in the ongoing Republican battle to end the welfare state. Himmelfarb's critique of the welfare state is well known, and is an important intellectual resource for the "broad and disturbing political agenda" to which we referred. It is no secret that, like the Reagan administration's cynical expansion of the federal debt, the balanced-budget amendment is an attempt to place the federal government in a fiscal position that will require the elimination of discretionary social spending. That is what we meant by "fiscal strangulation," and we consider it a lethal threat to the poor.

It is good to have Finn and Himmelfarb's endorsement of "government's responsibility for the common good." But if government is to meet that responsibility, it will have to have the revenue to do so. The policy of the Republican party is designed to deprive the federal government of that revenue. That is why the balanced-budget amendment is "really a war on the idea of government's responsibility for the common good, and especially for the needy."

Jesus & the Qur'an

In his "The Pillars of Islamic Faith" [January 31], David B. Burrell writes that "the Qur'an...is taken by Muslims to be the Word of God made Arabic just as orthodox Christians take Jesus to be the Word of God made flesh." And again: "[T]he Qur'an remains God's Word, not Muhammed's, so that Christians should liken the Qur'an to Jesus rather than to the Bible."

Here Burrell appears to echo the renowned Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who in his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* [1966] writes: "The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ." Granted the Islamic belief that, as Nasr puts it, the Qur'an "is the Word of God revealed to the Prophet through the archangel Gabriel" so that "both the spirit and the letter, the content and the form, are divine," the comparison between the Qur'an and Jesus is, I believe, a forced one unable to be sustained. What creates a gulf of difference is the Christian belief in the Incarnation, that Jesus is true God and true man—a belief abhorrent to Islam. Nasr himself hints at the inadequacy of his analogy when he qualifies the Qur'an, the Word of God, as corresponding *"in a sense* to the body of Christ" (emphasis added). When, however, he holds that "the form of the Qur'an is the Arabic language" which "religiously speaking is as inseparable from the Qur'an as the body of Christ is from Christ himself," he strains the comparison beyond comprehension.

The basic analogy is also an invidious one which cannot be allowed as an irenic bridge between Islam and Christianity. The very real and fundamental doctrinal differences remain to be faced and the ongoing Islamic-Christian dialogue may yet help us to approach it with insight through the mystical theologies of the two faiths. Thus it is worthy of more serious and respectful thought on both sides. Whatever the case, *vive la différence* that grants challenging and enriching perspectives as we together plumb the reality of the "incomprehensible Creator."

(REV.) JAMES R. ROBERTS
Burnaby, B.C., Canada

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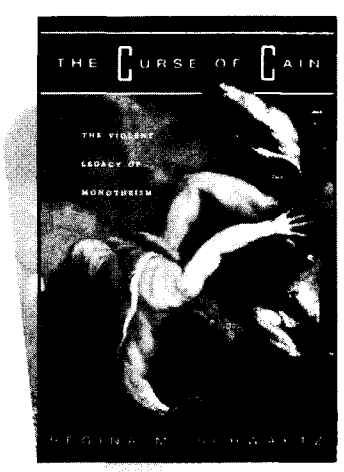

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MOY MOY SEALS THE BARGAIN

Jo McGowan

Adoption in India is still a very strange concept for most people. The most positive response I get from strangers who learn that our third child is adopted is surprise. Incredulity is more common, with a vague desire to warn me of the near-certain calamities awaiting us as she grows older. People here worry seriously about blood lines and the caste system. The idea of taking on an absolute genetic unknown is too much to consider. Still, some brave couples do adopt, and every year more people are taking the chance.

When Moy Moy, our adopted daughter, was fifteen months old, a friend of mine called to invite me for dinner. She had had a stillborn baby a year earlier, and she told me on the phone that she and her husband were now seriously considering adoption. But while she was very eager, her husband still had misgivings. Graver than his doubts, however, were those of his mother, with whom they shared a home. In fact, my friend felt sure that if the mother could be persuaded, her husband's fears would vanish. She asked me if I would come and talk to all of them, with Moy Moy as Exhibit A.

I agreed, but as the evening approached, my own misgivings increased. Just before hanging up, my friend had mentioned almost casually that a baby was actually available right then and they were to make up their minds and give the agency a definite answer by the end of the week. My dinner with them suddenly took on portentous overtones and my own role now seemed too close to God's. What if I said the wrong thing? A baby's fate hung in the balance, it was true, but so did a family's happiness. Just because adoption was right for us didn't mean it would work for everyone.

When we arrived at their home, I was nervous, but Moy Moy was at her best. She was an adorable baby and that night she seemed even more so. She was also, for some reason, unusually well-behaved for the occasion. I sat with my friends in the living room and Moy Moy played contentedly on the floor near my feet. The man's brother and sister-in-law were also there (theirs was a traditional joint family), along with their two teen-age children. Only the grandmother kept her distance. She kept coming into the room for one reason or another—to offer drinks and snacks and later, during dinner, to bring fresh, hot *chappatties* one at a time as they were produced—but she never joined the conversation. She glanced at Moy Moy often, usually when she thought I wasn't looking, but she made no attempt to talk either to her or to me.

My friends, on the other hand, were full of questions. They wanted to know whether I had felt any differently toward Moy as compared to the way I had felt with my two homemade children. Had there been problems with my in-laws? How had my other children reacted? What was Moy like when we first got her? Even as they spoke, however, I kept getting the sense that the real question remained unasked. Finally there was a long pause and then the man came to the point: Was there any way to be reasonably sure (he knew, he said hurriedly, that nothing could be 100 percent) that the baby would be "normal"?

I stared at Moy Moy as I tried to frame my answer. Little did I know then that three years later she would be diagnosed with a form of cerebral palsy which would severely limit her intellectual abilities, but perhaps I had some inkling, some mother's deep intuition that all was not well. What I told them was that the whole business of having children, homemade or adopted, was sheer madness and that the only sensible way to do it was with both eyes firmly closed: a leap of faith into absolute darkness.

Did the grandmother hear me? I spoke in English and so far I had only heard her speak Hindi. Maybe she understood, maybe she didn't. When we got ready to leave, she came to the door to say goodby. Moy Moy was in my arms by then, a little sleepy and very clingy. When the grandmother appeared, however, Moy Moy lifted her head from my shoulder and looked intently into the grandmother's eyes. Whatever was happening between them was so powerful that the rest of us stopped talking to watch. Without taking her eyes off the grandmother's face, Moy Moy stretched her arms out to her. When the grandmother made no move to take her, Moy leaned so insistently forward that it was clear she would soon land head-first on the floor. Reluctantly, the grandmother reached out and gathered her in. Moy Moy put her arms right around the grandmother's neck and nestled into an embrace so tight that it looked as if she had been waiting all her life to be where she was just then.

It was over in less than a minute. When she handed Moy Moy back to me, the grandmother's eyes were full of tears.

A week later my friend called to say that they had adopted the baby. She is five now and the joy of their lives. And Moy Moy is six and the joy of ours. □

Jo McGowan *is founder of Karuna Vihar, a school for children with special needs, in Dehra Doon, India.*

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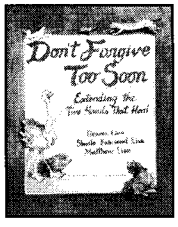

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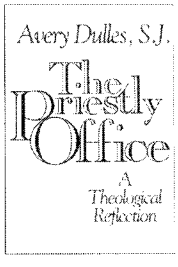

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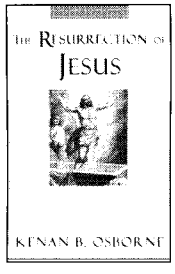

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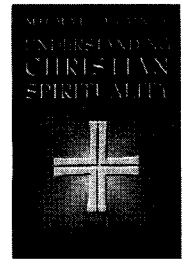

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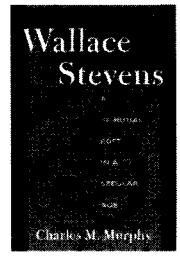

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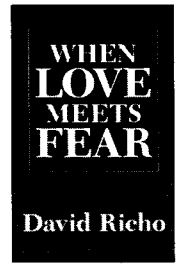

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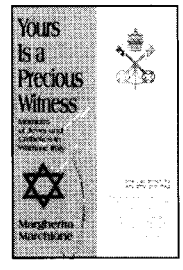

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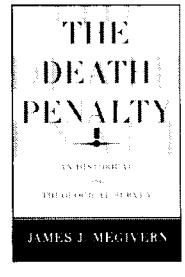

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